The GREATEST GIFT

A·W·MARCHMONT

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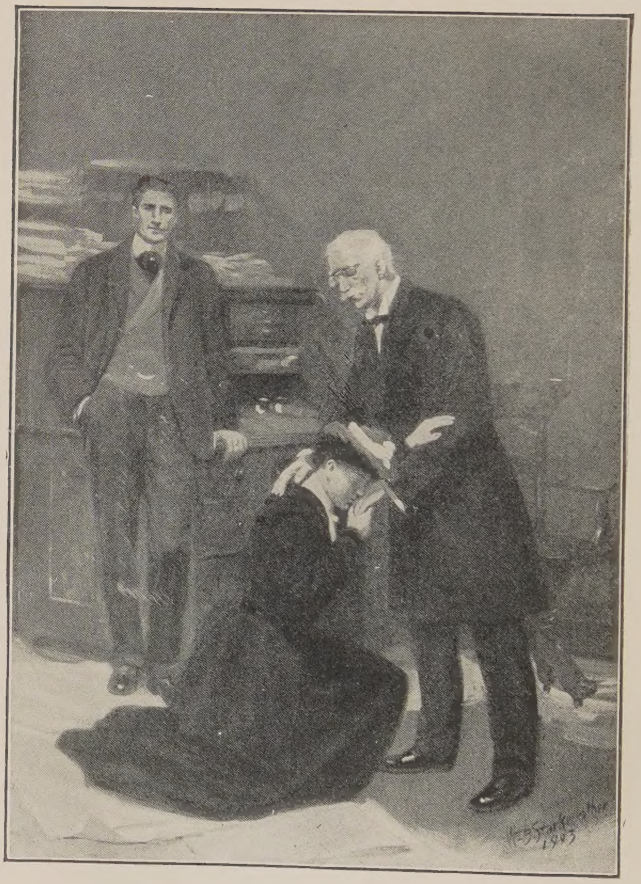

She sank on her knees before him.—Page 362.

Frontispiece.

THE GREATEST GIFT

BY

A. W. MARCHMONT

Author of "By Right of Sword," "A Dash for a Throne" "In the Name of a Woman," Etc.

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The Greatest Gift

THE GREATEST GIFT.

"The greatest gift,
A woman's heart; the heart of her I loved."

PROLOGUE.

I.

The mid-day express was tearing northward at full speed through the gusts and squalls of a boisterous March day, and the carriages, lightly laden, jerked and swayed after the panting, screeching engine.

The occupant of one of the compartments, despite the rocking of the carriage, was walking from side to side in evident impatience. He was a tall, broad, good-looking man in the early thirties, and his bronzed face and sailor-cut clothes told his occupation at a glance.

On the seat opposite to that on which he had been sitting so long as he could keep still lay a letter and a telegram, both open; and, as his eyes fell on them from time to time in his walk, an expression alternately of intense pleasure and of pained anxiety came over his comely face.

"Six thousand a year, and probably ten! Phew!" and he whistled as if to relieve his feelings. "It almost takes a man's breath away—especially when the man's

had bother enough to make as many hundreds. How the lassie's eyes will dance at the news! God bless her! And what a light there'll be on her face—dear heart! It's good to have a wife to tell news like this to. Six thousand—probably ten! I must read the letter again."

Then, with a gesture that might have been construed as half-apologetic, had any one else been present, he picked up the letter and read it.

310, Lincoln's Inn Fields,
London, W. C.
March 10th, 186—

Captain John Drury,
s.s. *Madeira*,
c/o Indian Pacific Co.,
Gracechurch Street, E. C.

"Dear Sir,—Can you see us immediately upon your arrival, as it is of the utmost importance that we should have an interview without delay?

"We may say that in accordance with your instructions we have had the borings completed on both estates during your voyage, and the results have proved satisfactory beyond all anticipations. There is every reason to say that the properties will yield an annual return of at least six to seven thousand pounds (£6,000 to £7,000) per annum, and probably ten thousand (£10,000). We have indeed already had offers approaching closely the smaller sum we had named.

"There are certain formalities and arrangements which must await your arrival, and some of them ought to be forthwith completed. The sooner they

are settled the better. Hence our urgent request for an immediate call from you.—Yours truly,

"Stern & Shapcott."

"Sorry I hadn't time to call. Should like to have had all the particulars to take down to Hattie. How full of curiosity the little woman will be! But I could not delay even a train in the face of this."

Here his face clouded, and the pleased look gave way to a puzzled, anxious expression, as he laid down the letter and picked up the telegram.

"What can it mean, I wonder? Can't be that anything's wrong with our boy?"

"Come home the moment you reach England. I fear trouble. Most urgent.—Rachel Patmore."

"Why on earth didn't the good old soul say more—or less? What trouble can she mean? Can't be with the wife or Godfrey? Surely she'd have said something. God keep them both safe! Well, they've got my wire before this, and I shall soon be home now, though this confounded train seems to crawl. It's a grand thing to be home—ay, and a grander never to have to leave my darlings again!"

Then he recommenced pacing from side to side of the carriage, thinking of the contents of the letters, and full of an intense longing to reach home.

By and by he let down the window with a joyful exclamation, noting a landmark that he knew well; and he thrust out his head and shoulders and drew in deep breaths of the air, as if he would steep his senses in the subtle promise of home.

"I can scent the dear old hills!" he cried to himself, as he drew in his head and wiped the shower-drops from his face and beard, laughing a deep-chested laugh of delight the while.

Soon the train began to slacken speed, and he put together hastily his hand luggage, and then thrust his head out again to feed his eyes upon the sight of the little northern town, which was always in his thoughts when he was on his voyages; and he tried to make out through the driving mist his home where it nestled on the hillside to the east of the town.

A sense of disappointment touched him for a moment as the train stopped at the platform and he saw no one there to meet him. In some way he had pictured the dull, commonplace station as the background for the bright, love-lit face of his wife when she should welcome him with that happy, radiant smile which his thoughts had never wearied of conjuring up. He was thus disappointed at not seeing her. Moreover, the fact that no one met him added to the anxious doubts which the telegram had roused.

Then it seemed to him as if the people were getting out of his way. Every one knew John Drury, and every one loved his cheery, breezy, honest, sturdy English ways. But now everybody seemed to be too busy to notice him.

"Don't be a fool," he said to himself. "As if you thought everybody ought to leave their work just because you've come home! You're a nice selfish fellow."

But he did not succeed in rallying himself. He passed out of the station and jumped into the nearest

fly, telling the man, who was by chance a stranger to him, to drive as quickly as possible.

He was very restless during the drive, and kept thrusting out his head first from one window and then from the other, despite the now heavily falling rain.

When the fly reached the house his impatience drove him to jump out and walk quickly through the small garden, wondering where everybody was. As he reached the door, an old woman dressed in black met him.

"Well, Rachel," he said, trying to speak cheerfully, though he felt startled by the woman's look. "This is a nice sort of welcome for a man who's fresh from the other side of the world. Where are my darlings? I have such splendid news for them."

The woman, with the familiarity of an old servant, laid a detaining hand on his arm as he was passing into the house. Then, as she looked into his face, her own eyes held gathered tears, and her lips trembled when she tried to speak.

"Why, Rachel, my dear old friend," said John Drury kindly, "what's your trouble? What has happened to you?"

"The Lord be guid to ye, Maister John. Gether your wuts and your courage weel in hand, for it's wantin' them baith ye'll be the day. Nay, ye mauna gae in a minute till I tell ye. I've been speerin' for ye these twa hours, ever sin' the message came. And now I darena tell it ye; the Lord help us all."

"Come, Rachel; what is it?" said John Drury, his voice firm, though his cheek paled at the other's words. "Is aught wrong with Hattie or the bairn?"

The old woman looked at him for a minute sorrowfully and in silence, the tears which had gathered rolling down her cheeks.

"It's a mournfu', sorrowin' house ye've come back to, Maister John; and that's the truth."

"There's no one—dead?" he asked.

"Nay, not dead; but it's waur than that—it's waur than that," said the woman.

"Worse?" cried John Drury, starting. "Worse? What do you mean?" And in his agitation he gripped the other's arm so hard that he pained her.

"Ay, waur," repeated the woman, shaking her head slowly from side to side. "Ye need be the braw lad that ye are, John Drury, for the hand o' the Lord has fallen heavy on ye the day. Madness is waur than death, and crippled life than death, either," concluded the woman sententiously.

"For God's sake speak plainly, Rachel!" cried the man.

"Ay, that will I, for ye maun ken it soon or late—better soon. The wife has lost her reason, Maister John, and in her daftness has nearly killed the bairn—doin' waur; cripplin' the wee laddie for a' his life."

The man stared hard into the other's face, as if scarce understanding her words, and then said, "Let me go and see them." And the change in his tone alarmed the woman more than any great outbreak of excited feeling would have done.

They went into the house, the woman leading, and passed up the staircase.

The wife lay in a heavy stupor, with two women in close attendance; and John Drury stood by the bed-

side in silent, awful anguish, till he could endure the sight no longer, nor bear the pain of the thoughts which it roused.

"The bairn?" he said, turning to the old woman.

She led him to another room where the doctor had just completed a second examination. The child was unconscious, and lay swathed in bandages.

"How did it happen?" asked the wretched man, still unnaturally calm in manner.

The old nurse told him in broken terms how she had had fears for some time for her mistress's reason, and had watched; and how some days before a sudden change had increased her fear and caused her to send off the telegram. And lastly, how that morning, almost directly after the telegram had come announcing the husband's return, his wife had yielded to a sudden frenzy, in which she had vowed that she would kill the child, and in her madness she had thrown the boy from the window of her room to the gravel path below.

"Was there no apparent motive?" he asked, when she had finished and was weeping.

"I forgot," said the woman, as she put her hand in her pocket and drew out a letter. "I found this in her room."

He took it, gazed a moment at her writing on the envelope, and kissing it broke it open. As he read, a look of anguish spread over his face, which became white, haggard, and drawn. His misery and hopelessness seemed to age him by half a score of years, while a wondering, mystified expression puckered his brow into a dozen lines:

"Your absence has betrayed you. I have learned your secret—your traitorous love for Margery Allingham. But I'll punish your treachery. You drive me to my death; but my boy shall go with me. Godfrey shall never live to be in the care of my rival. May a false husband's curse light on you and ruin you as you have ruined me.—HATTIE."

"Poor Hattie," he murmured. "Poor deluded child! What can have caused this?"

Then he read the note again, like one almost stunned and unable to understand its meaning; and, putting it away with a deep sigh, he went again to the bed on which lay the maimed child.

Bending down he took the little thing's white hand and toyed with it with his finger. There was no answering clasp. He bent and kissed the nerveless fingers.

"Will he live?" he asked, turning to the doctor.

"I believe so, now," was the answer.

"Is it so that he is—is hopelessly crippled?"

"I fear so."

"God help him, my bonny, bonny little lad!"

Seeing a slight bead of perspiration on the child's face, he drew out his handkerchief to wipe it, and as he did so he drew with it the letter of the lawyers announcing his good fortune, which fell down on to the bed. As he picked it up his hand shook, and he was more moved than he had yet been.

"I was only glad for them," he murmured. "And now—"

He did not finish the sentence, and his head sank

on his breast, a deep, sorrow-laden sigh shaking him."

"It is hard to bear—very hard!"

Then he fell on his knees by the bed, and kissing again the little white hand, he buried his face on his arm on the bed. Next he raised his hands and prayed with awful earnestness.

"Oh God, Thou knowest I am as innocent as this babe! Help me not to rebel against this trouble. Help me to bear it. Give me strength." Again, after a long pause, "It is Thy will. I have no right to murmur. I will not. Thou hast given; Thou hast taken away; blessed—yes, blessed—be Thy name. But it is hard!"

Then speech failed him, and laying his head close by that of the maimed child, he burst into tears.

II.

"Who says that?"

The question was asked with a touch of imperious quickness, and the speaker, a strongly-framed, upstanding man, with self-reliance written in every line of his face, turned to his companion with a grave, earnest look while he waited for her answer.

The girl laughed lightly and coquettishly.

"Is it such a very dreadful thing, then, Mr. Dallas, to be told that a girl who everybody says is pretty, admires you, and that you are supposed to admire her in return?"

"Yes, it is serious when you say it, Miss Crawshay, and say it in such a tone as to imply that there is more

behind it," answered Hugh Dallas. "As for what others think, psh! But you—"

A warm flush rushed into the girl's cheeks at the look which accompanied the words, and she tried to hide her feelings in a laugh.

"I thought you were to be engaged to her," she said, and, picking up her pet spaniel, she buried her blushing cheeks and golden hair in the dog's silky coat, while she glanced at the man teasingly out of her roguish blue eyes.

He was quick to read the real nervousness that lay under the light banter, and he went close to where the girl was standing behind the trellised rail of a veranda and spoke in a low tone.

"Do you say that, remembering what passed a year ago?"

The girl drew in her breath with a quick catch and stepped back from where she had been standing, and the blush faded rapidly, leaving her face grave and pale, while her eyes avoided the hot, passionate gaze of her lover.

"I did not—I do not want—I—I—"

She stopped and raised her eyes an instant and then dropped them again, very nervously.

"But I want you to remember that night, Miss Crawshay—Beatrice. I have come now to ask for the promise you gave me then. I told you that with such an object to spur me, I would make some sort of a start within the year. I have my foot on the ladder now," he said, smiling with proud confidence, "and I mean climbing. My chance has come. I've been doing a goodish lot of work for a paper in the prov-

inces, and now I have been offered a post on the staff. It's next door to the editorship, and will be that soon. I didn't tell you till it was all settled ; though I wanted to," and speaking in a buoyant, light-hearted, happy tone, he looked for a smile of pleasure at the news.

But the girl had shrunk back and was trembling, and looked frightened.

An expression of surprise and momentary pain flitted over the man's face. But the result was only to brace his resolution. He stepped on to the veranda and took her hand.

"You are glad, Beatrice, aren't you? You are not hurt that I did not tell you before? Ah, my dear one," he cried, tenderly and earnestly, carried away by a thrill of feeling at the touch of the girl's hand in his. "I have longed for this moment, longed to be able to come and tell you all, to see the light come dancing into your eyes as I saw it a year ago ; the light which only love can kindle, my darling ; to claim your promise and to know that you are mine, my own, all my own." He put his arm round her and looked into her downcast face as he added, in a whisper, "You do love me, don't you?"

The girl was trembling violently and did not answer.

"Beatrice!"

Love, entreaty, anxiety, all found expression in the single word. He drew her closer to him and stooped to kiss her. Then she shrank back from him and shivered. He released her instantly, and she covered her face with both hands and leant back against the wall. A pause followed, full of intense emotion to both.

The man broke the silence, his voice nervous and a little hollow, but yet firm.

"What is this?" he asked.

After another pause, she took her hands from her face and looked at him, her breath coming and going quickly in her effort to repress her agitation.

"Are you angry?" he asked.

"You will hate me," she said, in a tone just above a whisper, and trembled as she spoke—"hate me." She repeated the word as if it eased her to blame herself. "I hate myself."

He knew then what was coming.

"You wish to be released from your promise?"

He read the struggle that was passing in her; and, though the knowledge that she was false pained and wounded him beyond measure, he strove to hide his feelings and to make the girl's task easy.

"I was going to—to write," she faltered.

"It is enough," he answered quickly. "I ought not to have forced you to tell me. It has been hard for you. I ought to have seen for myself. I have been thoughtless. It has all been my fault. I had no right to ask you to wait for me. And yet, I thought—but there, I trusted you."

It was not meant bitterly; but it cut the girl more deeply than any reproach he could have uttered, and she winced.

"Good-by," he added, after a pause.

"Don't go—for a minute," she said, not looking at him.

He stood gazing at her, and his thoughts were a mingled memory of the last year's love scene between

them, and of the little signs and tokens by which he had seemed to read her love for him.

"You will hate me—when you know," she said again; and the words broke his reverie. "Why don't you taunt me, or reproach me, or revile me, or do anything to make this easier for me?" she cried, with some vehemence. "You know that you are hating me all the time that you look so calm and cold."

The unexpected vehemence of her words surprised him, and his face showed this.

"I am—"

"Wait," she cried impetuously, interrupting him. "Let me tell you. I will tell you. I have taken back the promise, because—because—" she hesitated and seemed to struggle with herself.

"Don't—" he began, pained and troubled for her.

"Because I cannot be poor." The words came with a rush.

"Ah!" It sounded like the cry of a man who has been struck.

"It is true—it is true. I cannot be poor. I will not be poor. I have promised to be the wife of a rich man. Now reproach me," she cried, and hid her face in her hands again.

"Don't," he cried hastily, raising his hand. "Don't say that is the cause. I would rather it were anything else. Rather that you have ceased to care for me; that you have wittingly and willingly jilted me; that you have had a woman's love for a woman's triumph; that you have never cared for me at all; anything rather than that you know no higher feeling than a paltry love of money."

"It is true. I cannot be poor. You had better hate me."

"No, it is not you, it is myself that I despise. You cannot help your nature; but I have been blind and a fool." He said this under his breath.

The silence that followed was full of pain to both.

"Can we not be friends?" she asked wistfully, glancing up at him.

"Friends!" he echoed; and then after a long pause, "I suppose you think so, or you would not say it. But—" He shook his head half sadly, then added: "Sincerely and honestly, I hope you will be happy. I would not have you otherwise. You know what is most likely to make you happy, and you have chosen it. May the choice prove wise. Good-by."

"Good-by. Won't you even shake hands with me?" she asked, as Dallas turned away.

"Certainly," he answered, and held out his hand.

"I am glad, after all, that you are not angry—and not more put out."

She hesitated and stammered in her awkward desire to express regret for her callous treatment of him. She had quite misread his calmness, and did not notice the look of astonishment on his face at her words.

He said nothing, and turned away.

She stood still on the veranda and watched him as he went into the house for a moment to get his hat, and then as he crossed the small, square, walled garden to the gate, and she pressed her hands to her bosom, as if to check her intense desire to call him back, and to hold within bounds the misery that filled her when he left without once looking back.

And when the gate had closed behind him, and she heard his firm, quick footsteps die away on the flags of the street, she bent her head down on the trellis rail, and sobbed as if her heart would break. She had never loved him so well as in that hour of losing him.

CHAPTER I.

"Oh, how can you say that, Mr. Ramsay?"

And Margery Allingham stopped in the act of picking a bunch of roses, and looking at her companion through the bud-laden branches of a tall, full standard rose-tree, shook her finger at him, smiling very sweetly the while.

"It's a fact—upon my word it is," answered the young fellow, a dark, well-built, well-clothed man of some five or six-and-twenty. "Do you think I should care about the poor old souls in Garthorne village if it had not been you who showed me what to do? That's a good one, and no mistake," and the laugh he gave revealed a row of white even teeth, between full but shapely-curved lips, and a dark mustache, while his face was abeam in every feature with admiration for the girl.

"I won't believe that, Mr. Ramsay. Why, they every one swear by the young Squire of Garthorne," said the girl.

"They swear by a good many other things, too, sometimes, I think; but, so far as I'm concerned, it's all false glory—unearned increment, as good old Dallas would say. I'm a humbug, a hypocrite, a Pecksniff—what you like," and he laughed again, frankly and openly, a jolly laugh to hear.

"But I don't like hypocrites—at least, I mean—"

She stopped, and her eyes danced with fun. "I don't think you're a hypocrite, though if you were one, and if all hypocrites did as much good and gave away as much as you do, it would be all the better for the world."

"I don't care about making many people happy; I only care about one," said Alan Ramsay, looking at her meaningly.

Margery Allingham turned away to the rose-tree again, and the effort she had to make to reach a bud that was high up brought a rich color to her face, while the young fellow stood nervously turning over with his foot a stone that lay on the turf, glancing now and again toward the girl. He was half afraid that he had offended her by what he had said, and yet half determined to go further, and propose to her there and then.

"Can't I help you to get that rose down?" he said, and called himself a fool because he could not keep his voice steady as he went close to her.

"No, thank you; I have all I want," said the girl hurriedly, with a sudden feeling of shyness. She cast a quick, nervous, glance at his face, and felt confused when she met his eyes, and slipped away to the other side of the rose-tree.

"It was so stupid to feel like that!" she thought, "when we have been alone together a hundred times before," and then she glanced at him again, as if to search for the reason. Something that she seemed to read in his face at once assured and excited her, raising a hundred different feelings.

Neither of them spoke for a long time, though the man went to her side and stood by her.

"Love took up the harp of life, and smote the chords with all his might," and the silent harmonies drew the two together.

"Those are lovely roses," said the man, feeling that he must break the silence, and he put out his hands to touch them.

"They are for old Dame Dwelly," answered the girl, naming an old bedridden villager, but not looking up.

The emotions which thrilled her were strange and embarrassing, and yet she was conscious of feeling intensely happy. She held the flowers toward him, and, as she did so, their hands touched. Involuntarily each glanced into the other's eyes.

"Margery," said the man in a whisper, taking her hand in his.

She made no effort to draw it away, and Alan bent over the flowers, waiting till his throbbing, bounding pulses should grow still enough to let him speak.

Just at that moment a loud whistle came from another part of the grounds of the Manor House, and a voice was heard shouting noisily:

"Alan! A-lan! A-lan! Yoicks! Hulloo!"

Both started.

"My darling," whispered the man in quick, passionate haste, while he tried to kiss her hand, but kissed his own instead; and the next minute they were several yards apart, the girl very red and very busy adding to her bunch of roses, and her lover asking in off-hand tones whether she wanted any rhododendron leaves to give the bouquet a finish. Meanwhile the shouting continued and came nearer.

Before the owner of the voice reached them, how-

ever, a girl somewhat younger than Margery, and darker and a little taller, her sister Nan, came up very quietly.

"Guy is looking for you, Mr. Ramsay, I fancy," she said; "I think he wants you for tennis. What are you plucking rhododendron leaves for?"

"Eh? Oh, for a—for my nag. He's awfully fond of them. I asked your sister if I might take one or two."

"Oh!" exclaimed Nan, and laughed. Then she cast a rapid glance at both. "I believe they're very good as chaff," she said quietly.

"Yes, rather; splendid."

At this moment the shouter came up.

"Oh, I say, I call it too jolly bad of you two girls to leave me to do all the entertaining for that curate chap. It fags me out. He's awful nuts on you, Marge. You should have seen his face fall when you went off the tennis ground. But I say, Alan, doesn't he just fancy himself at tennis? Come and give him a dressing. He's awful swaggery about his play. Wanted to give me full thirty because he said I was a boy. Like his cheek. But I licked him properly, sewed him up, and now I want you to come and tie him up at level. What are you all doing up here?" broke off the lad suddenly, looking from one to the other.

He was a handsome, merry-faced boy of sixteen, with a strong likeness to his two sisters.

"Where's uncle, Guy?" asked Nan, ignoring his question, "and Godfrey?"

"The captain's off somewhere with Alan's friend,

Mr. Dallas, I think, and Godfrey's I don't know where. He's such a rum beggar. You never know where he is for five minutes together. Come on, Alan, let's bottle up that blessed curate."

And laying his arm in Alan Ramsay's, he led him away, the two girls following, Nan stealing more than one glance at Margery's face. Then she slipped her hand into the other's arm and squeezed it.

"Two pretty girls," thought Hugh Dallas, as from a corner of the house he saw them all go on to the tennis lawn, where the curate and Alan's brother, Donald, Guy Allingham's chum, were playing a sett. "Alan's a lucky fellow." He knew his friend's secret. "I wonder if he's done it. They both look monstrously happy. And the other girl looks as if she knew what had been going on, and enjoyed it almost as much as her sister. How some girls cotton to a thing like this."

Then he smiled to himself as he knocked off the ash of his cigar, and looked at it meditatively, as some men will when their thoughts are busy within them, as his were, scampering over the fields of five years to the evening when Beatrice had roused him from the one love-dream of his life.

"Heigho! I wonder where the captain is? He said he'd be here in a minute or two. What a fine old fellow he is. What a glorious Liberal he would have made, if only he had chanced to be cast that way. His great heart teems with thoughts and plans for other people. I'll have a look round for him."

Captain Drury, who had been showing him through the stables, and farm buildings, and vineries, and

flower-houses, had left him for a moment, promising to return. The two men had been mutually attracted by the magnetism of two frank and sympathetic minds.

"What a kindly, generous gentleman he is," mused Dallas, as he moved slowly along the path away from the tennis ground. "It comes out in every pulse of his heart. And how proud of every living thing about the place, in his cheery, breezy, happy way. And yet —there is a something somewhere that I didn't get at. It pops out now and again in a glance of the eye, a curve of the lip, a drop in the voice—a something that speaks of a fly in the amber, a bitter somewhere in the honey. I wonder——"

And he stood still on the lawn, on to which he had strayed, and was very thoughtful. His reverie was broken by the sound of a deep, heavy sigh.

He looked quickly round him for the cause, but could see nothing, and moving on a few paces, came to a walk that opened from the lawn through a small shrubbery, and at a little distance he found what he sought.

The crippled son of the house, Godfrey, was sitting on a fallen tree in an attitude of deep dejection, his head sunk forward on his chest, and his crooked back hunched up in a manner that made his deformity much more than usually apparent.

Just as Dallas caught sight of him a sound of noisy, merry laughter came from the tennis ground, and when the cripple heard it, he seemed to wince in misery or anger.

"Poor beggar," said Dallas to himself under his

breath, moving back across the lawn. "Poor devil! Nature or something has done him an ill turn. He's not like other fellows I've seen with a crook in the back. Generally they have enough conceit for three average sound men. But this one's mind is as ill built as his body. He winced just now when that laugh came as if it had hurt him. I suppose he can't bear to see other people enjoying themselves in any way that he can't join in. Jealous of it, by Jove!"

He stopped as a sudden idea flashed across his thoughts.

"I wonder if he has as sharp eyes for Miss Margery as her sister seems to have, and if *that's* got anything to do with it. If it has, heaven help the poor beggar. He'd take that sort of trouble about as badly as could be. But I can't leave him miserable there. I'll try and rouse him a bit for the old captain's sake. No wonder there's a fly in the amber. That's it."

When he was far enough away he turned and began to whistle, and then walked back to the path, and stopped when he reached it with an exclamation of assumed astonishment.

"Ah, Mr. Drury," he said, very pleasantly and cheerily, "so our tastes square a bit, do they, in liking a little quiet thought?"

The cripple had jumped up hastily on hearing his approach, and his pale, delicate, and almost beautiful dark face flushed at being discovered. Hugh Dallas took no notice of the look, but continued in his easy, cordial manner:

"What beautiful grounds you have at the Manor House. I have never seen prettier. These wild spots

as foils to the rest are delightful. May I trespass on your good nature and get you to take me round? The captain has taken me through all his stables and buildings and hot-houses, and I should like to see the grounds."

"My father is very proud of his buildings," said Godfrey Drury, won over by the other's manner. "I will gladly show you the grounds. You are right, they are beautiful. We all love the place."

By slight degrees Hugh Dallas, by largely monopolizing the talk at first, drew Godfrey to speak with increased freedom, and at last with cheerfulness.

He sounded him as to his ways of thought, his habits, and his reading. He listened closely when Godfrey spoke, and followed up the clues to any congenial subjects, until he led the other to take a growing interest in the conversation.

Thus, when they reached the tennis ground, both laughing, and the cripple's face flushed with pleasure, Dallas saw the two girls turn and glance at Godfrey, and then at one another with surprise.

They all stood together then, chatting and laughing, while Alan Ramsay was giving the curate what Guy called "beans" at tennis. Dallas watched the cripple very closely, and soon thought he could detect some signs that the guess he had made that Margery had been in the other's thoughts when he had found him alone was correct. As the game drew to a close they all turned and watched it, and when their admiration of Alan's skill and activity found vent in words, and the two lads were loudest in praise of his play, Dallas found that Godfrey grew silent, and then he caught him

furtively eying Margery to see where she looked. When once or twice pleasure at Alan's success showed in her manner and broke forth in some exclamation, he noticed Godfrey's brow grow dark, and an expression of pain or trouble pass over his face.

Dallas knew then that it was Margery, and a thought of possible troubles and complications ahead flashed across his mind.

When the game finished, Margery was standing by Godfrey, and the curate, vexed at having been beaten in the presence of the girls, came up to them. He was a tactless man, and after saying that he was out of form and out of luck, and making a multitude of excuses, he turned to Godfrey, and, holding out his racket, said in a patronizing way :

"Now, Mr. Godfrey, you try a sett. It'll do you good to move about a bit."

The cripple flashed a look of anger at him while his pale cheeks crimsoned.

"Godfrey does not care for tennis, Mr. Lee," said Margery, interposing. "He only plays when I want to have a lesson."

"Eh? Oh, of course not. Forgot. Beg your pardon," stammered the curate, floundering hopelessly, and turning red in his confusion.

"Ah, here comes the captain," said Dallas, who had been a witness of this, and of the look of thanks which Godfrey had given Margery. He felt he could have kicked the curate.

"Upon my word, Mr. Dallas," said Captain Drury, "I don't know what you'll think of me. Just imagine, Madge, I took Mr. Dallas all round everything, trotted

out every hobby-horse in the stable till he must have thought me the most unconscionable old oddity of a tiresome agricultural sea-dog; and then went away saying I'd join him in a minute or two, and never went near him again, but left him to find his way alone to you youngsters. If it hadn't been that he was coming from an old fogey like me to all you, I should hardly venture to look him in the face. As it is, Madge, you must be peacemaker as usual. Ask him to forgive me," said the captain, turning a smile for Dallas into a look of love for the girl.

"Please, Mr. Dallas, you must forgive us. We have a bad habit of going away, and when we get alone, we lose our reckoning, and don't keep the log properly. And we're sorry. Isn't that it, uncle?" said the girl, smiling merrily.

"Aye, Madge, that's it—that's it," answered Captain Drury, with a laugh which seemed to die away too quickly, as if something in her words had stirred him. "There you have it, Mr. Dallas. I am really very sorry I was so forgetful," he added.

"Nay, captain, say no more pray," returned Dallas. "As a matter of fact, I was a gainer, for I got your son to take me round the grounds."

"And what do you think, uncle," chimed in the younger girl, who came up. "They actually were laughing together all about the walks and came here with all the bubbles of the jokes still making them laugh; and then wouldn't tell us a word of them."

Nan knew well enough how it would please the captain to hear that of Godfrey.

"Wouldn't they? Wouldn't they? What conduct,

eh, Nan? And Godfrey in the joke too, eh? Well now," and he laughed as he looked first at the girls and then with a very kindly expression at Dallas. "So, Master Godfrey," he said, looking round.

But Godfrey had left them, and as they looked toward the house, they saw him just going indoors.

The old captain gazed after him for a moment with a thoughtful look which revealed much to the vigilant eyes of Hugh Dallas.

"Ah, he's gone in," said the captain, forcing back the smile to his face.

"Yes," said the curate. "I think poor Mr. Godfrey is tired. I suppose he tires very quickly. He doesn't seem very strong."

"H'm," the captain coughed, and shot a quick glance at the speaker, which the latter was too self-occupied to notice, and soon afterwards they all moved up to the house hearing the first dinner gong.

CHAPTER II.

During dinner the talk was general, a good share of it falling to Hugh Dallas. He was greatly attracted by the character of the old captain, and to watch the latter in the midst of those whom he loved and who loved him was an experience peculiarly pleasing to a man of Dallas's warm sympathies.

He listened with much interest when the captain spoke of what he was trying to do with the people round the estate—the fisher folk at Seacove and the laborers in the villages ; especially the attempts that had been made to promote self-help and thrift.

"It's Madge there who ferrets out what we have to do—she's a perfect regiment of charity foragers rolled into one," said the old man, nodding toward Margery at the bottom of the table, and smiling—"not but what Nan does a famous lot," he added, pinching the latter's cheek. "And between us we try to work out something different from the soup and coals and blankets process ; but it's poor material to work on, much of it."

"I have often regretted there is so little ingenuity shown in work of this kind," replied Dallas. "If men would only take the trouble to spend as carefully as they hoard, and would put into the giving some of the energy and cleverness needed for getting, things would

be different. I remember once a fanciful suggestion being sent to me to the effect that the administration of charity, gauged both by ingenuity and generosity, should be the path to the House of Lords. It's so easy to write a cheque for a hundred pounds and so hard for others to give away even a hundred pence without risk."

"You would take away from charity the one worthy motive—the desire to do good for the mere sake of doing it," answered the captain.

"True; but you would intensify the desire to do the good. A peerage, a title, or an order of some sort, or a place about the Court would vastly warm the springs of much charity."

"'Do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame,'" quoted the curate.

"It's the highest of all good," replied Dallas quickly; "and always will be. But it is better to do good noisily than not to do it at all—if not for the doer, then for the receiver. A House of Peers who had graduated in practical philanthropy would be no bad institution in a democratic age." He smiled at the conceit as he finished. "By the way, you have tried co-operative work here, haven't you, for farming and fishing, and so on?"

"Yes," said the captain. "The most hopeful experiments of all. How did you know?"

"I had some account sent to me of the work before I left Lancashire. Here you are inside the area of our papers at Middlingham; and certainly I must claim editorial omniscience."

This led to some talk on newspapers and newspaper

work, and Hugh Dallas's own editorial experiences, in which all seemed to take a great deal of interest.

"You must watch him closely, Nan, when he gets on the topic of newspapers," said Alan Ramsay, who was sitting next to the girl. "Dallas is the most dreadful fraud when you want him to tell you anything on that subject. I believe all newspaper men try to keep up a little mystery."

"The only mystery is the 'we,'" answered Dallas, smiling. "And nobody either inside or outside an office has quite solved that. But all the rest is simple enough. A mere matter of sitting at a table and putting a pen or pencil to paper. Of course you must be careful to put down the right words and see that others do the same; but after that, all the rest is easy. Any one can run a newspaper. Ask the first person you meet if that is not so."

"Ah, now you are laughing at us, Mr. Dallas," said Nan.

"Is it really an easy matter?" asked Godfrey, speaking for the first time.

"I am not laughing at you, Miss Nan. I am only saying what many people think. Is it easy? Well, yes and no. The routine is easy—and often irksome. But there is something more than routine; and that something can never be easy, for it calls for and uses all the best that a man can give; and uses it mercilessly. But no man grudges it; for the work has a charm which, once tasted, never palls, never cloys, never satiates. The charm is that of the man who loves his craft; who listens with rapture to the clear rhythmical sound of his hammer on the anvil of

life, and feels that each blow is keeping time with the pulse of some human heart and must make for either the happiness or the misery of the world. No man, unless he have the flat skull of the fool, can help feeling the seriousness of such work—or help glorying in trying to do his best in it."

"You love your work," said the captain. "But do you think that people are led now as they used to be by the papers?"

"Do I think less people led by the Bible, because so many more read it? Do you think a sailing vessel is less influenced by the trade winds, because steamers are largely independent of them? A skipper with a head wind shoves his ship ahead by tacking, but he uses the wind, captain," returned Dallas with a smile. "Without the wind, whether it be astern, or on the quarter, or dead ahead, there's no progress. And so it is with us. The Press is the breeze that makes progress possible nowadays."

This was always a favorite subject with him, and it occurred to him now to try an experiment on Godfrey Drury.

"You will smile at my enthusiasm," he continued. "But I do love the good craft, and I love it for one great reason. It can help the humblest, as it can pull down the strongest; and it gives to the weakest and feeblest creatures on earth the strength of a giant to help those who are in a like condition."

He saw both Godfrey and his father glance up quickly at his words.

"How do you mean?" asked Margery.

"I mean that it is the only live profession where the

man of ideas is the equal of the man of action ; nay, his superior officer. He directs what others shall do. Were I the strongest man, I would join the Press, just as I would if I were the feeblest woman."

He noticed then that the captain's eyes had turned in his son's direction, as if the words had suggested a train of thought.

"Woman, do you say ?" asked Nan.

"Woman, of course, Miss Nan," he answered. "The Press of the future will be half manned by women—to use a bull. The weakness of to-day will be the strength of to-morrow."

"The sphere of woman is the home," said the curate.

"Is, perhaps. But when she has no home, what is she to do ? Fret, flirt, fool, starve—or work ?"

"A true woman has no need to fear for her future," replied the curate, with complacent sententiousness.

"You are right," answered Dallas dryly. "But not quite in the sense you mean. Many valued forces of to-day are the despised wastes of yesterday, and the mental wastes of to-day will exact their revenge in the future. Where men are few, bodies are valuable ; but in a plethora of millions it is brain that tells. Are you anxious to see the sphere of woman's work widening, Miss Nan ?" he asked, looking at the girl more observantly than he had yet done, struck by the eager zealous expression on her face and in her eyes.

"Yes," she replied readily. Then she looked round as if expecting some sharp criticism.

"Oh, Nan's a regular clinker when she sets off about that," said Guy, laughing. "She's a regular one-er, and

only wants blue goggles and cloth boots with no heels to become the regulation blue-stocking. Girls ought not to be allowed even to think about such things" he said, with an air of boyish superiority.

"Nan's all right, if you don't chaff her," said Alan's brother Donald, taking the girl's part, and then coloring.

"H'm," coughed Guy, in a significant falsetto. "Of course." And at this Donald covertly shook his fist at him, while the latter retaliated by taking two spoons, and, after clinking them together, pushing one toward Donald and the other toward Nan.

"Will you have a cigar, Mr. Dallas?" asked the captain, who had been thoughtful for some time; and at this they all rose from the table.

In the course of the evening an incident happened to show Dallas that what he had said at dinner had not passed unobserved by Godfrey. The party were in the billiard-room and Alan and the captain were playing together, when Dallas noticed that Godfrey had gone out of the room. Interest in the strange character prompted Dallas to go in search of him; and he found him sitting in the dimmed light of a fernery, having stumbled on him by accident, when, after an unsuccessful search, he was trying to find his way back to the billiard-room.

"Do you like ferns, Mr. Dallas, or have you strayed here merely to be alone?" asked the cripple, rising as the other approached.

"I had strolled out and was trying to find my way back to the billiard-room," replied Dallas, who had noticed the attitude of dejection in which the other had

been sitting. "But you—you must be fond of ferns to stay here like this alone?"

He felt an irresistible inclination to speak to him as to a child.

"Oh, I—" and his face clouded. "I am not always in the mood for—I mean it is best for me to be alone—sometimes."

"Ah, yes, sometimes. Just as it is with all of us," said the other cheerily.

The dwarf glanced up, and in the dim light it seemed to Hugh Dallas as if there were almost a look of entreaty in his eyes. He was about to speak, but checked himself, and, turning to a large fern, picked off some few dead leaves.

"You do not understand," he said, after a long pause. "You are fresh from the world outside, with the suggestion of the battle-field in every word and gesture of conscious strength and self-reliant power. You cannot see how still the air is here. It is like the wind of a cannon ball as it rushes over the land of the lotos. The weakling weeds are broken." He said this in a low voice, almost a whisper.

"There need be no lotos-eaters in our days," said Dallas.

"But those who have once tasted stay to eat, and there are many who have not strength for a stronger diet. In Seacove we all eat the lotos."

"Well, better that than drugs which have a ranker aftertaste," said Dallas, making a shot.

"What do you mean?" asked Godfrey, looking at him quickly.

"In the world we get our emotions turned to genie

to hurt us. Ambition, greed, love—strangers to lotos-eaters these—but consuming demons to those in the world who know them."

"Ah!"

It was scarcely more than a whisper; but the cripple turned away, and bent again over a plant and was silent. When he next spoke Dallas noticed a change in his voice.

"True. We know nothing of those. But you spoke to-night of journalism. Is it difficult to make a start?" He hesitated as he put the question.

"It is difficult for some," replied Dallas. "But the difficulty is chiefly a matter of brain and power. Have you a mind to try?" he asked.

"Why?" asked Godfrey, almost suspiciously.

"I thought you were interested, and you have many points in your favor."

"What are those?" asked the cripple, in a brighter tone.

"Education, reflection, patience, a power of concentrated thought, perseverance, determination to gain a given end."

"How do you teli that?" asked the other very sharply. "Do I carry my character, like a swineherd of old, on my neck? It is true I have determination. I have never yet been thwarted in a single aim. I would not be." His manner had changed suddenly to a sharp, suspicious tone. "I suppose all are like me in that. I cannot brook interference. I must have my way. I feel I will have it; and I can hold out long enough to gain any end. Is that strength or weakness?"

"It is both," answered Dallas. "Strength in a fam-

ily circle, but weakness in the world outside; yet often a powerful help to get what you want."

The other laughed—a short, unpleasant laugh.

"The family circle is my world," he said. Then, after a long pause, "I should like to try to write. Could you help me?"

"There is no royal road. If you have it in you, it will come out. If you haven't, you can't force it, like grapes, or pines, or strawberries. But I can help you so far that I will be gardener. Send me a sample or two, and I'll try to see whether it's fruit or not; and if so whether forced or natural."

"I will," and impetuously he held out his hand, but then seemed ashamed of his boyish impulsiveness. Yet Dallas had done much for him by putting a new motive into his life, and in a way he felt it.

As for Dallas he was more interested in the cripple than ever.

As Dallas and Alan Ramsay drove home that night, the former listened quietly to Alan's raptures about Margery, and gave his opinion like a loyal friend.

"And the captain, too; he's a grand old fellow, isn't he?" asked Alan, pleased at his friend's praise of Margery.

"Yes," replied Dallas, agreeing cordially. "He is, as you say, a grand old fellow. And I suppose he is as happy as he is jovial and good, eh?"

"Rather. Just the best and breeziest mortal possible."

"Has he any secret bothers? I fancied so once or twice."

"Worries? No. Steady, mare, steady. Worries?"

and Alan laughed. "Rather not, with Margery to look after him. She takes care of him, I can tell you."

Then followed more rhapsodies.

"The other girl seems a bright, pleasant, thoughtful body, too," said Dallas.

"What, Nan? Oh, yes. She's a good little soul. Fond of the captain, too. But there," he said, with a laugh, "no one seems to think of Nan when Margery's about—except Margery herself, you know," and he went off again.

"Do you think Godfrey cares for Miss Nan?" asked Dallas.

"What?" exclaimed Alan, laughing rather boisterously. "Godfrey care for Nan? No. Poor beggar; bless you, he'll never marry."

"Why not? He's flesh and blood, nerves and passions like the rest of us, isn't he? Aye, and strong ones, too. He'd be an awkward rival in the household," he added, hinting at what he thought he had observed.

"Eh? What? Are you—" he stopped and laughed. "That's looking ahead a bit, by Jove, after the very first call. Oh, no," he said dryly, "I don't think Godfrey cares for Nan; so he won't be a rival in the house for any one who does that." Then he laughed again, "No more chance with her than with Margery."

Dallas let him have the laugh, saying nothing, but letting the misconstruction pass unchallenged though not unobserved.

"I do pity that poor beggar," said Alan, after a pause.

"I wouldn't let him know it, then," answered Dallas. "His is not the sort of mind that swallows pity easily."

"You asked whether the captain had troubles," said Alan. "Of course poor Godfrey's twisted back is a trouble to him. He worships him, I think. I know Margery has told me no end of things to show that. And the poor fellow is so odd with it; I suppose he can't help it. So morbid. Gets away and mopes by himself sometimes for hours together. Then, at other times, he'll lead the whole place a dance if he can't get just what he wants precisely when and how he wants it."

"Yes, I should think he has a pretty stubborn will. He's been about spoilt."

"Spoilt! By Jove, I should think he has. There's not a blessed thing in the house or out of it, that every one of them would not strive all they know to get for him if they could. He gets ill, now and then, and the whole house is at once all topsy-turvy, and one can't get a word in edgeways. Margery won't leave the place. She knows how the old captain dotes on him, and how much more he thinks of anything done for Godfrey than done for himself, that she won't budge."

"Ah, then he would be an awkward rival," said Dallas again.

"Don't be afraid, Hugh," said his friend, with another laugh. "That's all right. Margery would have told me, you know. She has no secrets of that kind," and the subject started him again.

"H'm! All roads lead to Rome, I see," said Dallas quietly. "And all topics round to one subject," and he laughed.

Soon after that they drove into the village of Garthorne, and reached Alan's home.

CHAPTER III.

After Alan and Hugh had left the Manor House, it was natural enough that a word or two should be said about Dallas. The opinions were favorable, and Godfrey Drury, who very rarely made a friend, agreed with the general verdict.

"I like the lad well," said old John Drury plainly. "I think he's staunch, genuine, and clever; and he is certainly fond of Alan."

"I don't know how it was, but I did not have as much conversation with him as you all seem to have had," said Margery. "I declare Godfrey had quite a confidential talk."

"He is not like other men," said the cripple. "I like him, too. He seems quick and shrewd at understanding one. He is a great talker."

"But also a good listener," said Margery. "Whenever I noticed him, he seemed to be listening to somebody else."

"Alan thinks no end of him," put in Donald Ramsay.

"He plays a clinking good game at tennis," said Guy, "and billiards, too, by gum."

"And what's your verdict, Nan?" said Margery, turning to the girl who had been listening to them all.

"I think he's very clever, and, what Godfrey says,

sympathetic. He's so quick to see what you are thinking and what you want."

"'Sympathetic'—h'm," coughed Guy, in his teasing falsetto; and he nodded his head gravely and warningly at Donald.

Nan pretended to see nothing of this; but in spite of her air of unconcerned dignity, her face grew a little red. Thinking then that it would be very undignified to be caught blushing, she said that she was tired and bade them all good-night and went away to bed.

The boys followed, and the other three sat talking, the captain being in very good spirits.

At first the cripple, who rarely spoke much, even when alone with his father and Margery, took a quite unwonted share in the talk and showed great interest, but gradually it waned, and his customary silence and reserve checked him.

Then Margery set herself with careful tact to draw him to speak, choosing those subjects in which she knew he was most interested, and appealing ever and again to him for his opinion.

In this way she rallied him, and then, when the talk had circled again to Hugh Dallas, she turned with a smile, and laying her hand on his arm, said:

"By the by, Master Godfrey, that reminds me I have to scold you. Where did you get away to twice to-day when we wanted you; once this afternoon and again this evening? I looked around for you and you had run away."

"I did not think you wanted me," he answered. "You all seemed so occupied and—and I did not want to disturb you."

"Now, I have a good mind to be angry with you in earnest. Would you believe it, uncle? Godfrey the Unsociable thought our conversation so much beneath his notice that he would not stop when we particularly wanted him, but stole away when no one was looking, and actually had to be found and brought back by Mr. Dallas. There!"

Both old John and Margery knew that Godfrey's reason for this had probably been the morbid feeling on his part that he was not wanted—a feeling that was like a canker in his life.

"Scold him, Margery, scold him," cried the old man, looking affectionately at his son and rubbing his hands and laughing to the girl.

"I have a good mind to call him disagreeable and selfish; should I, uncle?" laughed Margery sweetly.

"Scold him well, Madge," said old John again.

"I have a good mind to tell him that the next time he does it, if he ever does do it again, I will send him to Coventry, disown him as a brother, and never speak to him again. Should I, uncle?" asked the girl.

'Scold him, Madge, scold him. Call him a rascal," and the old man laughed till the tears came into his eyes, brought there half by the present fun, and half by the consciousness of the real cause of Godfrey's conduct.

"There, sir," said Margery, pointing her finger at Godfrey. "You hear what uncle says I'm to do. Now, I'm going to do it. You—are—a— Now, I'll begin again. You—are—a— I've a good mind to call you a rascal. And I would, too, if it weren't for the absurdity of supposing that the son of my dear old

uncle could possibly be such a thing." And she went and knelt at old John's knee and laid her face on his hand and kissed it. "But that's all that stops me," she said, raising her face and looking across at Godfrey.

"That's right, Madge; scold him, scold him," said old John, stroking her hair.

"We won't have anything more to say to him, will we, uncle, until he says he's sorry, and begs my pardon? We are not going to let him treat us as he pleases, and come to us and leave us just as he likes. Look you, Godfrey the Unruly, the sentence of the Court is that you beg my pardon directly, and promise never to do it again. Oh, I can be a judge, and a stern one too, I tell you. Can't I, uncle?"

"Yes, my pretty one, of course you can."

"So now, Godfrey the Unruly, what plead you?"

Godfrey had sat silent all the time, drinking in the tones of her voice, delighting in her mere presence, charmed by her mood, and full of his deep secret love for her.

"I plead guilty, fair Portia," he said. "I promise amendment; I crave pardon, and throw myself on the mercy of the Court." He spoke with gravity.

"Uncle, you hear that. He calls me Portia. Isn't that as much as to admit himself a veritable Shylock! Can I pardon a Shylock, uncle?" asked Margery.

"I urge upon the Court," said Godfrey, "that the terms of my pardon were set forth by the Court herself."

"That's true, Madge Portia. He may claim the bond," said the captain, smiling.

"Ah, but then he had not made confession nor admitted he was Shylock."

"Reasoned like a woman, Madge. You named the terms yourself and are bound, when they are complied with, as you know you are, you little quibbler."

"Well then, know you, Godfrey the Unruly," said Margery, kissing the old man fondly and rising, "the Court has taken counsel on the subject of your plea—"

"Take counsel again, Madge," interrupted the captain.

"Taken counsel and hath again conferred," went on the young girl, kissing her uncle several times and smiling, "and hath determined to accept your plea. The Court hath decreed that in future you must not, under penalty of losing the love the Court doth bear you, neglect to attend upon the Court whenever she desires it. You must not linger by yourself, nor deem yourself too great for others' company. See that you regard the Court's commands. And now, in token of the good-will that the Court doth bear you, it is here decreed that the title of Unruly shall be no more applied to you, and that in place thereof you shall be known as Godfrey, Margery's brother. The Court to this decree doth hereby set her seal."

With these words she went to him and kissed him on the forehead, saying:

"The Court salutes you, brother Godfrey. And now the Court, being uncommonly tired, will go to bed—I mean adjourn. Good night, uncle. Couldn't I play Portia?"

She kissed the old man two or three times, putting

her arms lovingly round his neck, then shook hands with "brother Godfrey," and left the room.

The kiss had been a very simple action, simply done; and the very openness with which it had been given showed how innocent and sisterly it had been. But the girl's breath on his forehead, and the touch of her lips, had sent Godfrey's blood coursing through his veins with violence enough to almost burst them. As soon as she had gone he bade his father good night, and went to his room to brood over his secret passion, and wonder what the end would be.

The captain sat on for some little time, and presently, lighting a cigar, stepped out into the grounds. This was always his custom, and he generally ran over in thought at such times the events of the day.

To-night, the closing scene, where Margery had so gently rebuked Godfrey for his conduct during the day, gave the current to his thoughts, and it bore him rapidly to that subject—his boy's infirmity both of body and mind—which formed the sorrow of his life.

He was a gallant soul, and he sought always to hide from others the intense grief which this was to him. No one, not even watchful, loving Margery, had gauged its depth, or guessed all that it meant to him. It had gloomed his life, and all his struggles against its influence had not brought him ease. He had tried to force himself to believe that he had much to be grateful for in the fact that the boy's life had been spared, but there were moments when he could not but repine.

Himself endowed with great physical strength and health, and with a mind of singularly robust purity

and openness, the boy's weakness of frame and morbidness of mind were unutterably painful to him. Added to this, there was always before him the dread possibility that Godfrey's mind might give way, and this increased the burden of the sorrow infinitely.

To-night the fear was on him as he paced up and down the terrace which ran along the front of the house, and he might have carried something of the sadness indoors had it not been that he heard the strains of Margery's full, rich voice ringing out through her open window on the soft warm night air as she sang to herself.

He stood still and listened until the song ended, and a sense of the soothing comfort which the girl had brought into his life, like the touch of cool fingers on the heated brow of a fever-stricken patient stole over him. He sighed, and then smiled to himself as he murmured her name.

Margery, indeed, appeared to be in the highest spirits.

Although the "Court" had pleaded being tired, yet there was small attempt made to go to bed. When she reached her room she let down her hair. She had beautiful hair, nut-brown in color, and so thick and plentiful that the uncoiled tresses lay around her head and shoulders, reaching in their luxuriant profusion far below her waist. Leaning back in a low reclining chair, she began to read.

But after a very few pages the print faded gradually from her eyes, the book fell upon her lap, and she sat wrapped in thought. Pleasant thought, too, to judge by the happy expression on her face.

By and by she rose, and, going to a drawer, she brought out an old desk, from which, after she had unlocked it, she took a small packet tied with a piece of faded silk. This she carried back to her chair, singing the while the air of a favorite song. While singing she untied the little packet, and laid the contents one by one on her lap with tender care.

It was a weak, commonplace kind of action for a heroine. But it was to her a great pleasure, for each of the little common things in the packet—the faded forget-me-not, the dead rose-leaves, the small Indian coin, the silver chain, and the photograph—was treasured by her for its association with Alan Ramsay, and was guarded with all the zealous care of love.

Given long before in an idle hour, and without much thought on the part of the giver at the time, they had all been kept by her as relics.

Undemonstrative as she was, there was a power of love in her heart, and she had given it ungrudgingly to Alan. She knew this well, and believed that her love was returned. Thus when she dreamed of the future, as she often would, and built her castle in the air—only a modest one—the center figure was always Alan. Her dream was ever of a happy, contented, quiet life, in which, with Alan at her side, she would lead much the same existence she had hitherto led, but under changed circumstances.

The chief difficulty she had in planning it all out was in regard to her uncle. She had for him all the love and reverence of a daughter. She knew his open, kindly nature, his never-ending generosity, his constant sympathy with all that were distressed or in

trouble. She knew, too, how much he loved her, and how much more she was to him even than Nan. The one cloud on the horizon was the fear that he might be distressed when the time came for her to leave the Manor House.

But then, of course, Alan had also to be considered, and thus her heart seemed a divided allegiance which she did not know how to reconcile.

And that day, as they stood in the rosery, Alan had spoken even more plainly than ever. She blushed with happy confusion as she recalled his words, and thus she toyed with her little treasures as she laid bare her thoughts—and pleasant, sweet thoughts they were—to herself.

Alan was so good. He always seemed to know what she would wish him to do. He had spoken to-day of much that he meant to do in Garthorne, and he always associated her with himself in the plans, giving her the credit. As if it was not his own clever self who always worked out the crude ideas which she formed.

She smiled sweetly at this thought.

He had been telling her so much of what he had planned to do, and had been asking her advice in a way that was simply delightful. He seemed always to put her foremost in his thoughts, and to have but one desire—how to please her.

Ah! there was no one like her Alan; none so handsome and brave and strong; no one who could look as he had looked that day in the rosery, who could make her heart go rushing on so furiously; no one who could rouse in her a thousandth part of the emotions that thrilled her in his presence.

As Margery thought of all this, she drew her hair over her bosom, where it lay like a dark coil, and taking the photograph of her lover in one hand, while playing with a stray tress with the other, she kissed the likeness once or twice as she leant back in her chair.

"Ah, Alan, Alan," she exclaimed softly to herself, "There never was such a bonny lad before in the world, I believe. So kind, so true, and so good!" Then with a sigh of pleasure she added: "What a happy girl I am, that all my world join in trying to give me pleasure!"

Then, she began to sing again, now softly, kissed the photograph once more, put away the little treasures, and kissed the packet once as she placed it again in the old desk. That old desk was the only thing she had which had belonged to her dead mother, and was thus a fitting garner for such tokens. Then she made ready for bed, to continue in tangled dream fashion the sweet thoughts which formed her lullaby.

CHAPTER IV.

Some four or five miles from Seacove stood an old ruined abbey, held in high esteem in that district for its picturesqueness, and it was arranged by the young people that they should have a walk to the place on the Sunday afternoon.

Alan had been eager for the walk, as he was anxious to resume that most interesting conversation in the middle of which he had been interrupted on the Saturday afternoon. This was the more necessary, as he was booked to leave home on the following day for a yachting engagement.

But the plan miscarried, the unconscious marplot being the old captain. Instead of taking his accustomed afternoon nap, he declared his intention of going with the young people, and it was a thoroughly understood arrangement that, whenever he went for a walk, Margery was always by his side.

Moreover, as his object in going with them was to see more of Hugh Dallas, to whom he had taken a very great liking, the result was that he and Margery and Hugh walked together all the time, being occasionally joined by Godfrey. Nor was Margery herself apparently averse from this arrangement, as she had grown suddenly half-afraid of Alan, after the experience of the previous day.

It seemed only a trivial circumstance that the little

party should have been divided in this particular way ; but it led to great consequences to all. It was just one of those thin shavings that Fate uses with such perverse dexterity to drive human plans awry.

The first result was that Alan had to leave for his yachting visit without coming to any understanding with Margery more than was to be inferred from the conversation in the rosery.

On the walk there was little of importance, beyond one small incident which gave Hugh Dallas further insight into the strange character of the cripple.

As the party were returning, Dallas, whose town limbs began to tire quickly, said thoughtlessly to Godfrey, who was at the moment at his side :

"Are you not tired, Mr. Godfrey ?"

A flush of mortification rushed into the cripple's face, who read in the words a slighting reference to his physical weakness, and before he could restrain his temper he made a short and angry answer.

Hugh Dallas noted quickly the train of thought he had set up.

"There, that's just the kind of stupidity we townsmen show," he answered readily and tactfully. "We always think that other people must be like ourselves ; and so, just because my legs were beginning to question me as to when we were going to reach the end of this tremendously long lane, and my feet were crying out that they had had enough, I thought everybody would be the same. But you folk who live out here think nothing, I suppose, of a walk which makes us townsfolk dog tired. Are you all better walkers than I ?"

It was thoughtfully said, and the captain noticed it.

"I'm tired," he said readily.

"So am I," said Margery. "But I don't think any distance ever tires Godfrey. He's a great walker." And then she went on to tell of some very long distances which he had walked; and in this way the incident passed.

The captain had seen with pleasure the way in which Dallas had turned the conversation round, and anything which was kindly meant toward Godfrey touched a very soft spot in his heart. Dallas rose several degrees in his esteem.

He himself was always looking out for some means of giving Godfrey pleasure, and he was often sorely troubled what to do to carry out his wishes in regard to him.

His was a nature of action. He was not given to thoughtful analysis. When a thing distressed or affected him, he wanted to find a remedy at once. Thus, when any one came to him in trouble, he relieved them to the best of his power at once. Generosity and kindness were instincts with him. He looked on his money thus as a blessed means put into his hands for the purpose of relieving those who were less fortunately situated than he himself in the world.

But with incurable mental trouble he was at a loss. If a man came to him out of work, he found work for him. If there were sickness in any home, he had food and medicine taken to it. But if the hand of death had fallen on a household, and stricken the members with inconsolable bereavement, then it was Margery who must go. He could feel for the troubled till his heart

ached with sympathy ; but when no means of practical relief were at hand, he was only likely to increase the others' grief by the plainness with which he showed his own sorrow for them.

It was Margery then on whom he relied. She seemed to know just what to say and what to do, and to carry with her in a marvelous manner the power of silent consolation. And the old man leant on her at such times.

But with his son he had no such support. He knew that Godfrey was not happy, and feared that there was some secret sorrow. He would have given much to learn its nature, but was utterly at a loss how to do this. Of himself he could not decide whether there was really a secret grief in the lad's mind, or whether the gloom which seemed to hang over his life were only the result of some morbidness which he might have inherited from his mother. This was just one of those problems which he was completely unfitted to discover ; and yet the lack of the knowledge preyed upon him constantly.

He felt that Godfrey's future might to a large extent depend on the answer to that question ; and yet he dared not seek the help of any one in solving it, since he would not tell to any one the secret of Godfrey's childhood. He had sometimes put a question or two to Margery and to Nan ; but their answers had only succeeded in increasing his uncertainty.

The question he wanted to put was whether Godfrey's humor was in anyway to be looked on as likely to lead to insanity if not dealt with in the proper way, or whether it was no more than the sadness which

might be the not unnatural result which physical deformity might have on such a nature as Godfrey's. But that blunt statement of the difficulty he scarcely used even to himself. Yet he felt that on the method of dealing with his son's peculiar disposition might depend his whole happiness in the future.

It was with the thoughts which this difficulty always raised in his mind that he had observed the manner in which Hugh Dallas had seemed to draw Godfrey to him; and it was with a half hope that Dallas might be in some way able to help in the solution of the difficulty that when the two friends were leaving the Manor House, after the walk, the captain pressed Dallas to visit them and so stay with them if possible—an invitation which he was glad to find Godfrey seconding.

Dallas on his side promised readily; and as he chanced to see a very pleasant smile on Nan's face just as he spoke, he thought to himself what exceedingly friendly people they all were.

In the evening the captain took up the thread of thoughts which had been thus started, and, as he was having his last cigar, began to speculate whether it would be possible for him to obtain Dallas's co-operation in finding out the secret which lay behind Godfrey's depression.

Chance was to succeed, however, where all his kindness and loving thought had failed.

Closely as the captain had watched Godfrey, and well as he thought he knew the latter's nature, he had in fact only a vague idea of the depths of passion and bitterness, which filled the young fellow's life. The deformity of Godfrey's body was but an outward indica-

tion of a still greater deformity of mind. He knew that he was a hopeless cripple, though ignorant of the cause; and the knowledge was the canker of his life. Nature had given him a singularly handsome face—as nearly beautiful as a man's face could be—and a mind which in a more comely body might have been capable of notable achievements. But he was morbidly supersensitive. He had within him an unbounded capacity for physical enjoyment, and yet he was a cripple. He was mentally endowed beyond the majority of his fellows, and yet felt himself less than the least of them. His sensitiveness never suffered him to be free from the consciousness of his deformity, and he was possessed by a galling sense of his inferiority to other men. This was like a mental plague, poisoning every chance of happiness. Morbidly hateful of pity, he could yet read nothing but pity in others' thoughts of him, and could find no other motive for any act of kindness shown to him. He was thus haunted by a knowledge of what he could have accomplished had he not been a cripple, and his mind was often filled with vague fanciful longings from which he felt himself cut off by his deformity. Life was robbed of all its salt; and anticipation was always either a dread or a pain.

To such a nature love could bring no pleasure; and the passion which he felt for Margery was only a source of added mental pain.

The morbid exaggeration of self to which his infirmity had led prevented him from approaching the higher emotions of love. With him it was an intensely concentrated and passionate longing to possess and enjoy something which was denied to him. All his life

was in his love; and the flame burned the more fiercely because it was fed from the secret store of selfish yearning.

Yet he loved absolutely without hope; and all the hopelessness he set down to his misshapen body. And when that feeling held him strongly, his misery and despair were almost frenzied.

During the days which followed the visit of the two friends this sense of utter hopelessness was especially oppressive, and he stayed much alone brooding ceaselessly over his grief. The captain noticed this and wondered what was the cause, but Godfrey made no sign.

With the others, the cripple made a feeble effort to shake off the depression, and when Margery asked him one day, gently and thoughtfully after her wont, why he kept from them, and whether anything was the matter, he tried to turn away the question with a smile as he answered in the negative.

"I know what it is. I can guess your secret," cried Nan, laughing.

He turned very quickly and looked at her, almost as if in alarm. He had always feared that her quick eyes might pierce his secret.

"What is it?" he asked, his cheek reddening.

"You've been set off by Mr. Dallas, and are writing a book or an article. That's why you spend so many hours in your room alone. He means to surprise us all one day," she added, turning to the others.

"You are very sharp, Nan," he said, relieved by the girl's words, and not unwilling to have his absences thus accounted for.

But the problem he was solving was that of no puppet of fiction. It was his own ; and at times he felt as if the struggle were likely to kill him.

"I wish it would," he exclaimed that day, as he reached his room. "I wish to God I could die. Better death than life like this."

When his passion found voice ; as it frequently did—the talking with himself being a relief from the restraint with others—he was like a man partly demented. Wholly absorbed, he would walk quickly from one end of the room to the other, or throw himself into a chair or on to a couch, or even on to the floor ; and after long, brooding periods of intense and painful thought, the words would come pouring out volubly and rapidly, like a suddenly liberated stream, and then he would relapse as suddenly again into silence.

The subject was always the same : himself, his love, and his infirmity.

There was an intense earnestness in his manner ; and his voice, singularly sweet and melodious, yet attuned as it were, to the expression of melancholy, was full of pathos.

At first when he entered his room, he cast himself on a chair and gazed listlessly out of the window. But the conflict that was raging within him left no room for interest in the lovely landscape view which stretched away in front of him ; and when the sound of the voices of the others came in through the open window, he closed it and began pacing the softly-carpeted room with quick, agitated steps.

"Margery, Margery, my love," he cried aloud, with

suddenness. "Oh God, that I ever was born to suffer thus." This was the burden of his thoughts.

After a minute he threw himself on his knees before a chair in front of the window, and buried his face in his hands. Presently with the same impetuous action, he uncovered his face again, and interlocking his fingers tightly, held his clasped hands pressed upon his bowed head, while he spoke in a voice that was almost a moan of prayer and anguish, the words coming in fitful rushes, broken by pauses.

"Oh God, oh God, have mercy upon me in my misery!" he cried. "Is it not enough that I must be something less and worse than all my kind; that I must be a thing of scorn to raise no other feeling save pity; a wretched mis-hewn fragment of humanity, born only for endurance and never for reward? It is too hard, too hard. . . ." Then after a pause, with less passion and more pathos and regret: "Ah, Margery, Margery, if you could only know my love, I wonder could you give me even a slight return. No, no, there is no hope, there is no hope. . . . Yet this last curse might have been spared me. To love with a love that surges through my whole being and is more to me than my life: a passion that goes out from my heart, my brain, my soul, and finds no return because of the mere ban of shapeless deformity. I do not love with my body, but with my soul; but my soul is unloved because of my body. . . . God has placed in my soul the image of Himself, and yet allows the grosser earthly part to thwart the yearnings of His inspiration! . . . What a fool I am to talk thus wildly, as if I were a thing to be regarded as of any worth.

Why should men regard what God Himself despises? . . . Is it too much to ask for mercy? He knows my heart, my soul, my misery. Why will He not grant me oblivion: sever soul from body as body severs soul from happiness, and if He can, put an end to both? To live without Margery were worse than death; and yet to die without her worse than life. Is there no power can grant this oblivion? . . . No, there is none, and mine are but empty words. I know it. There is no end to this misery for me. To pray like this is mere blasphemy; if there be such a thing as blasphemy. . . . It is with Providence as with men, I am a thing of nought."

He spoke the last words with vehement bitterness, and rose and strode about the room as if in anger. But the sorrow soon laid hold of him again, the angry light died away out of his beautiful face, and, sinking down in a chair, he gazed listlessly out of the window. At that moment Margery was in the garden below, and as his eyes fell on her, he flushed, and trembled, and sighed.

"Ah, Margery, Margery, my love," he cried, "how fair an angel art thou to be to me so sore a plague!"

Then a long silence followed, during which he watched the girl as she moved about in the garden among the flowers.

Suddenly he started, disturbed by a light sound; and he went quickly through the open door by which his two rooms communicated to find the cause. The other room was empty, but, on trying the door, he found that he had not turned the key in it. He looked out on to the corridor, but saw nothing. Then he went back to watch Margery.

Some one had been in the room, however, and had Godfrey looked farther, he would have seen the old captain walking slowly to his own rooms with a very white and anxious look on his face. He had learnt the boy's secret now by innocent eavesdropping.

CHAPTER V.

So it was a love trouble after all, and Margery was the object.

The thought troubled and perplexed and saddened the captain, as he sat in his room thinking over what he had overheard. He could not at first understand the lad's despondency. If he loved the girl, as he said, why didn't he pluck up his courage and dare his fate like a man?

In truth, it was just such a trouble as he could not understand. He could not enter into the motives of those who fought secretly with sorrows without first making sure that they were real. He had always taken his beatings fighting. He was always for action. Better to fight the gale as long as possible than to slink away to leeward under bare poles. Time enough to give in when you were beaten; but make sure you *were* beaten, and beaten beyond hope, before you did give in. That was his policy.

Then he thought of his own love days—and breathed many a sigh over them and their departed happiness and gloomy ending—but here and there the memory was flecked with a smile as he recalled how he had carried everything by the vigor of his assault. He had never had time to shilly-shally, to doubt and wait and fear that he was to be refused. He had only been on

shore for short spells in those days, and if he had spent them in wondering and imagining—but there, what was the good of maundering on about himself.

Then he grew grave, and began to think seriously.

It was an odd coincidence that, if his son's happiness were to be wrecked, the innocent cause should be Margery Allingham, just as her mother had innocently helped to bring about his own life-grief.

Then the thoughts got busy again with the old themes and the old trouble ; the wrongful suspicions of his wife, the fearful effects, and all the time of horror and gloom that had passed.

This set up a train of strange thoughts.

Was Margery heart-whole ? Could it be that all that he had suffered indirectly through her mother could be really compensated for in the happiness which she could bring to his boy ? The idea pleased him ; and he let it have full run. Like a sailor, he was something more of a fatalist than most people, though many are ready enough to read fate and the decrees of Providence when the decrees fit in with their wishes.

He had never thought of Godfrey and Margery as lovers ; but then, as he told himself, he had never thought of the possibility of Godfrey marrying at all.

Could he try and sound Margery ?

At first the idea of doing anything of the kind disturbed him. But the recollection of his lad's misery, as he had heard and seen it, soon drove every feeling out of his mind, except a desire to go to the rescue as soon as possible ; and he began to think vaguely of what he would do.

He wanted first to do what Godfrey had evidently been afraid to do: to see whether there was really any hope for the boy. If there was not, he would go to Godfrey and tell him frankly that he knew his secret, and say to him, "Come, Godfrey, let us bear the burden like men; front to the enemy, head erect, eyes steady, and sorrow out of sight."

But he must first find out the truth.

Could he do it without Margery? Would Nan know anything? or Guy? The last was dismissed as soon as thought of. But Nan might. How could he ask her? Nay, how could she know? Would Margery tell her? No; because if there had been anything to tell, Margery, dear little heart, would have come to him. Would Nan find out of her own account? Who could be certain? If nothing had been told, there was only one who would know—and that was Margery. If he asked any one but her, he might do just what he wanted to avoid, and make a mistake, and that would be fatal. No; he must go to headquarters.

With him, to decide was to act.

That evening he observed the young folks closely. Godfrey, who looked so pale and troubled that the old man's heart ached, stayed in the room, and the captain watched him and Margery when they were together. Indeed, he threw them together; and he thought himself a perfect diplomatist when he drew Nan into a game of chess and sent Guy away to study, and so arranged the chess-board that he could watch the others, while Nan had her back turned to them.

He played egregiously badly that night, he never played well at any time—but that night he could not

see a move ahead, so that Nan, who as Guy said was a "regular duffer" and scarcely knew the moves of the pieces, won every game.

So obviously preoccupied was he that he nearly defeated his own object, for sharp-witted Nan saw his condition.

"You're thinking about something, uncle," she said once, "That's the third time you've lost the Queen by defending a check from a bishop. There she goes, and now you're check again. But what are you bothered about? I say, Margery—"

"No, no, Nan; it's all right there," he said hurriedly, moving a pawn up and threatening her knight. "You'll see in a minute. Perhaps I've a deep plot, and have given you that Queen just as a blind. Look out. Sailors always fear a squall most in fair weather, you know. Mind this castle"—and he touched a castle that could not by any possible combination be brought into his attack.

But this was enough to set the girl thinking again about the game, while the captain resumed his quiet watch.

Margery and Godfrey had been sitting together at a table on which stood a lamp with a large fringed shade, and both had books. The cripple had not been reading much, and the captain had seen him several times lift his eyes over his book and let them rest on the girl's form or face. Once or twice, while doing this, he had glanced hurriedly and it seemed nervously across at the chess players, to make sure that he was not observed, and he had moved his seat just sufficiently to have the light of the lamp on his

book while his face was concealed by the shadow cast by the shade.

After a time the two had begun to talk in low tones, Margery starting apparently with a question suggested by what she was reading, and then they had drawn more closely together. The subject seemed to interest them, and the captain watched the flushing cheek and brightening eye of his son, and hoped that he could detect in the girl signs of what he wished to find. And he determined to speak to her that night.

Quick to watch the captain and to study his moods, Margery had seen that something was amiss with him, and when she heard what Nan said about his being so preoccupied, and listened to the sound of his voice as he replied—she could always read his voice—she knew he was uneasy, and feared he might be unhappy.

Thus, when the others went to bed she lingered intentionally, looking for one of those confidential chats which the two so often had when all the rest were in bed.

As soon as they had gone, she went across to where the captain sat buried in thought, and leaning over the back of his armchair she placed one of her soft white arms round his neck and bent down and kissed him. He carried her hand to his lips and looked with a smile into her eyes.

"I read trouble in somebody's eyes," she said softly, "and I have stayed behind the others to see what's the matter. What is it, uncle?" And keeping his hand in hers, she moved round, and pulling a low chair to her, sat down by him.

There was something very soothing in her touch and

presence, and the captain felt her influence. But he did not speak. Indeed, he did not know how to begin. He was so anxious to find out what her feelings toward Godfrey were, and whether there was any chance for him, that he was afraid lest his eagerness might betray his purpose too soon.

There was another influence at work, unconsciously. In all his difficulties he was accustomed to take the girl into consultation, and all his instincts were now just to tell her the facts and let her decide what should be done. The girl was watching his face closely and saw that some sort of struggle was going on—and she divined that the matter was more serious than she had at first thought.

"Is it something I cannot help you in, uncle?" she asked, at length. "I can see you are troubled."

"That's not why I'm silent, little lass," he said, "but I don't know where to begin. I'm just like a great blundering East Indiaman, beating about with a head wind at the mouth of a nasty channel, waiting for the pilot cutter."

It was a habit of his when he was agitated to draw on his old sea experiences for figures of speech.

"I'll be the pilot, and my love will tell us how to steer. Now the cutter's made fast and the pilot's on board." She closed her other hand on his, and kissed him, and asked with a smile: "Now, captain, how's her head?"

"Ah, little Madge pilot. It's not so much how's her head as how's her heart. And I'm afraid the pilot don't know the channel; and there are shoals, and currents, and rocks ahead, and the mists are thick. I

can't even take the soundings, and as for getting into port, I don't even know what port we can make for."

"And must the pilot remind the captain of the sheet anchors of love, and faith, and trust?" And this look on her face and the light in her eyes as she asked this made her beautiful.

The old man let his eyes rest on her face for a while, and asked, with a sudden earnestness which surprised her:

"Do you love me, Madge?"

"Love you!" she echoed; and she was about to reply lightly with a laugh, and perhaps a kiss, when she divined that he had some earnest motive, and fitted her answer to his mood. "You have been my father."

"Are you happy at the Manor House? Do you want to leave it?" This he asked as the best way he could think of to try and probe whether she had any regard of Alan Ramsay—an idea he had once had.

"It is my home, and I love it," she answered.

There was a slight tinge of color in her cheek, but her face was from the light and he did not see it. She, on her side, was beginning to wonder whether Alan could have said anything.

"Yes, child," answered the captain, with a smile, as he pressed her hand gently. "That is just the answer I would have you make. It is home, our home. Mine, and yours, and Nan's, and Guy's, and—Godfrey's." There was a slight hesitation as he mentioned Godfrey, such as people show who are full of a subject and yet want to approach it gently. "We have been very happy all together, haven't we? Sharing the good

and the bad fortune, holding together fair weather and foul, like good messmates."

"Yes, uncle," said Margery, when the captain stopped, evidently somewhat embarrassed. "But what is your trouble now? There *is* something."

"Is there, Madge pilot," he replied, smiling, but rather faintly, for he was at a loss how to get on. "Dear little pilot," and he kissed her. "If I were in trouble, Madge, great trouble, would you try and help me?"

"Uncle!" cried the girl, with a catch of reproach in her tone that he should even ask the question; and she rose quickly and, settling herself on his knee, twined her arms about his neck and kissed him and nestled her head on his breast, by way of answer.

"Dear little heart," said the old man, who had rarely seen her more moved. "It is not my own trouble. I am too bulwarked by love to have any troubles of my own," he said, kissing her. "This trouble is my boy's—Godfrey's. But I seem to feel it just the same." He sighed deeply.

"What is it, uncle?" asked Margery. "Is it something very serious? Poor Godfrey."

Innocently, and, indeed, unconsciously, the captain had appealed to just that feeling in the girl's heart which was the dominant thought of her life—her intense love for himself and almost passionate desire to do that which pleased him. There was no sacrifice that could have been asked of her on that account which she would not have made cheerfully. At that moment, all her thoughts were concentrated on the one idea that something troubled and grieved him. What the

cause was or what might be needed to remove it, were only minor considerations. He was troubled, and it was her duty to relieve him. Thus, had his first approach been the result of the most carefully prepared and thought-out tactics, it could not have made her more eager to discover what she could do to help him.

He told her the story of what he had overheard, withholding for the time the mention of her own name; and throughout it all there were so many little touches which told her how deeply the teller was suffering, that before he had finished she was consumed with a desire, as keenly sympathetic as his own, to help Godfrey.

Well as she knew the old captain, and deep as she knew his love for Godfrey to be and his yearning for the boy's happiness, she had never seen him moved like this.

It was as if all the pain and disappointment and grief which he had felt for twenty years on the cripple's account had been compressed into the intense emotion which this last incident had roused; and the girl seemed, amid the telling, to catch glimpses of hidden depths of secret trouble in the old man's mind such as she had never guessed at, and her heart swelled with pity, concern, and love, while she was fired with a yearning to be able to help.

But it was not on Godfrey's account. Him she loved, but it was only with the reflected love—because he was the captain's son—tempered with that affection which, in certain natures, must always come as the result of long and close association. The instinct that

was uppermost in her mind, however, was to help him, because that would help the captain.

"And when I saw the poor lad's face, Madge, with its awful look of agony and despair," were the captain's concluding words, spoken in quite broken tones, "and heard him pray for something beyond and worse than death, I was like a man beside himself. I prayed to my God either that part of the burden of his grief might be lifted from his to my shoulders, or that at any cost I could be shown how to help him. Poor, heart-broken lad!"

The sight of her uncle's anguish made the girl wretched.

"Courage, uncle, courage. The prayer may be heard. The captain must have faith in the pilot." And she smiled and kissed him. "There is very little really hopeless trouble in the world, dear," she said.

"Aye, aye, that may be, little pilot; but this may prove to be a touch of it. There is but one course."

"'God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes,'" quoted the girl reverently. "There is no trouble that He cannot soothe. But why should Godfrey despair?"

He looked his answer, not putting it in words, and she understood all he could have said as to the other's crippled shape.

"Yes, it is true," she said, answering the thought. "But how does he know that all is so hopeless! A true woman who is worthy of such a love as that would take no heed of—of anything but his mind, his character, his truth."

She had stumbled over the sentence in breaking away from the word deformity.

"Who is she?"

She asked the question in all innocence.

The captain looked at her half helplessly, understanding how perfectly unconscious she was of the truth, and feeling that all the real difficulty had not yet been approached.

"To love hopelessly is sad for any one, Madge," said the captain somewhat irrelevantly, but not knowing how to say what had to be said.

"It must be worse than anything in the world," she answered.

This thought touched her closely, and made her think for a moment of Alan, calling up a very faint tinge of color to her cheeks.

"But, I repeat, you do not know that it is hopeless. Take heart, uncle,"—here she smiled again, and the color deepened a little—"there are few women who do not like to know they are loved. Go to her, if Godfrey dare not go, and plead for him. I would go, but woman cannot plead with woman on such a subject. Ah, uncle," she cried, with an impulse of affection, "did she but know you and love you as I do, you would not plead in vain."

She spoke with infinite love and tenderness in her voice, and nestled to him closely, and caressed him, and she felt him start and tremble.

"Ah, little heart," he said hoarsely, "would you say this if you knew who it was?"

"Aye, I would say it even if it were myself," she answered, thinking to comfort him, and smil-

ing to herself at what she thought such an absurdity.

"Now, God be thanked for His mercies," burst from the old man, his voice shaking as he put both his arms round her, and kissed her several times, "God be thanked for His mercies."

Then in a moment, as Margery lay in his arms, clasped almost convulsively to his heart, her eyes were opened. The revelation at first bewildered and frightened her. She felt little tingling chills in all the tracery of her veins, and she thought she was going to faint. But she made a violent effort for self-possession, so that she could nerve herself for what might yet be coming. She knew it was the crisis of her life, and her mind was of that vigorous kind which, after the first shock is over, is stirred by a crisis into activity.

One after another the impressions of all that this news might mean photographed themselves with a consummate correctness of dull detail upon her mind, the only live tone being the thought that at last she had, what she had often wished for, a chance of showing the gratitude she felt to her uncle.

Never once did she contemplate recalling her words, whatever might be the consequences to her. She had read such a wealth of relief and happiness and content in his fervent outburst of thanks that no offer which could have been made to her would have induced her to plunge him back into the condition of despondency and despair which she had witnessed.

There was a long pause after the captain's last words.

"God bless you, little light of my life," he said; and the girl was glad to note the altered sound of his voice.

"Would this make you very happy, uncle?" she asked, and she had such difficulty in clearing her voice that she had to stop in the middle of the sentence to cough.

"I would give my life if—if it would make you happy as well, Madge—but only so," he answered.

And at these words the girl understood fully all that had yet to be done. The captain would have to be deceived.

"Why did you keep me so long in suspense, uncle, not telling me the name?" she asked, forcing herself to smile, but hiding her face directly against his.

"Was it suspense, Madge?" he asked, in a whisper full of pleasure.

She nestled more closely to him without speaking.

"I never thought of it; never dreamt of it. What a blind old fellow I must have been," he said innocently. Then he laughed. "Just imagine my never having seen even a scrap of the right colors. I declare if I'd been asked, I should have been fool enough to say that you were running some different colors to the mast-head?"

"Would you, uncle?" asked Margery, in a whisper, fearing what he might say next and yet fearing to check him.

"Aye, aye; I was stupid enough to wonder whether it wasn't the Alan line that you were sailing in, and that was just my trouble, Madge. I was afraid—" his voice was quite low and shaky for an instant, and he paused.

The girl gave a soft, low laugh. The pain at her heart was too great for her to speak even a single word.

"Thank God, it is as it is. Why, it's positively a good thing that I overheard what I did, eh, little Madge?" He laughed again as he said this. "If I hadn't, who knows what would have happened? And there have I been almost eating my old heart out for fear of coming misery, when all the time I shall be the means of bringing you two together. I am an old fool, a regular, blind old bat, ain't I?"

Poor Margery. Every word stabbed and stung her. She must be alone; otherwise she would break down.

"A blind captain has all the more want of a pilot, indeed, hasn't he?" she said, as lightly as she could, lifting her head now from his breast. "Haven't I been a good pilot, and earned my money!" She put up her face to be kissed. "I've steered the vessel almost into port, certainly within sight of it."

"I thank God with all my heart for the blessings you've brought to me, my child all through your life, and now to-night beyond all. God bless you, my dearest little daughter."

The girl winced at the word, knowing its new meaning, but she did not let the captain see the movement.

"Good night, uncle," she cried, throwing her arms around him, and kissing him vehemently.

Then she slid off his knee and went to the door. Turning round and finding his eyes following her, she smiled to him and ran back, and, kissing him again, whispered in his ear:

"Good night, father. You're happy now?"

"Yes, my darling."

And so she left him blessing her and praising her in

his thoughts. Nor did she leave with him the faintest suspicion that he had blighted and crushed out the youth and happiness of her hitherto happy young life.

CHAPTER VI.

Jonas Rudyer and his wife were sitting at breakfast in the very pleasant morning-room of their house in Carmarthen Gardens, Bayswater.

Mr. Rudyer was busy with the inside sheet of the *Times* while his wife was skimming the advertisements. This was a shorter undertaking than her husband's and, consequently, she had finished first.

Five years had made very little difference in Beatrice Crawshay, and the four which had passed since she had married Jonas Rudyer for the sake of his money had been a time of great personal comfort. She had never seriously regretted the deliberate choice she had made when she threw over Hugh Dallas; but she had never forgotten that she had loved him. On the contrary, she had sedulously treasured the memory of that time, and in the placid current of her easy life, the well-springs of her old emotions rose now and then to the surface, but never with sufficient force to alter the set of the tide of her life.

Her shallow nature was, however, often moved by fleeting impulses, and she was stirred sometimes by rushes of sentiment which she mistook for something much deeper. At such moments she believed that she was as much in love with Hugh Dallas as she had ever been; and in those sentimental moods she was wont

to regard herself as a victim of Fate's ill-usage. But she had not the look of the victim.

She was as pretty and piquante as ever, did not look even as old as her four-and-twenty years, and made the most of her good looks. She had an extremely good figure, which she dressed to the utmost advantage. Her face had not any striking regularity of features or style of beauty, but it had life and brightness and magnetism in it, and it was one of those which for many men have even more attraction.

She was pretty enough, indeed, for the little frown with which she threw down the sheet of the *Times* not to spoil her looks.

"I declare there's nothing in it, whatever. Not a single soul among either births, deaths, or marriages, that one knows."

Jonas Rudyer was much older than his wife, owning to near fifty. He had been in business all his life, as a provision dealer—first retail and afterwards wholesale—had worked hard, lived simply, and amassed a large fortune, when Beatrice Crawshay's pretty blue eyes and golden hair had caught his heart. The girl's worldly mother had simplified matters and smoothed the course of his courtship; and in the end he had made the costliest purchase that had ever come in his way—a young wife with no quality so fully developed as the capacity for getting rid of money. He was very fond of her, and very kind to her; but hard-working men who have lived a regular, routine existence for nearly fifty years, find it difficult to drop the chrysalis scales of long habit directly they mate with a rather giddy butterfly wife.

"I hate the papers," said Mrs. Rudyer, seeing that her first criticism on the *Times* had passed unnoticed.

"Yes, dear," murmured her husband, as pleased as men usually are when spoken to in the midst of reading.

"Jonas," said his wife.

"What is it, Trixie, my dear?" returned the good man, lowering the paper and looking at her over the top of it.

"Is that a very interesting case you are reading?" she asked, with sweet satire.

"Well, my dear, it is rather a curious one. You see—"

"I thought it must be. I am so sorry I spoke to interrupt you."

"You didn't interrupt me, child," he returned.

"Not the first time, I know, Jonas. Because you didn't hear what I said. I mean the second time. But do go on reading."

"Now, Beatrice, what's the good of saying that?"

"Because I mean it, pet," answered the young wife, with a very sweet smile. "Do go on reading, because if you lose the time you won't be finished by lunch."

Jonas Rudyer looked at his wife for a moment, and laid the paper down; but being as discreet as he was good-tempered, he picked it up again, looked once more rather thoughtfully at her, and plunged again into the case of Jackson *v.* Roberts—the point of which turned on the question as to how far a wholesale firm was responsible for some hams of a doubtful condition which had been sold to the plaintiff.

He had read about three lines, and was just picking

up the threads of the case where he had dropped them, when :

"Jonas," said his wife.

"Yes, my dear." This with a sigh.

"Would you like some more toast?"

"No, thank you, Beatrice," he answered.

He had read about three or four more lines, when the little lady at the head of the table gave an ominous cough.

The husband fidgeted with the paper and lost his place.

"Jonas, dear."

"What is it, Beatrice?" This time with some irritation.

"Oh, never mind, dear. I can wait if it's disturbing you."

"What is it you want, my dear?"

"If you could spare time, I think I could eat just a wee bit more bacon ; but I'll wait till you've finished reading, if you wish, and then the bacon will be nice and cool."

"Nonsense, my dear," as he helped her ; "I beg your pardon." And he laid his hand again on the paper.

"I don't think this bacon is very good, do you?" she asked.

"I didn't notice any difference in it," he replied, getting the paper again into position.

"I don't think it's as good as that we had last week, nor the week before last, do you, dear?" she asked.

"My dear girl, do you really think I can possibly remember the taste of the bacon I ate a fortnight ago. If you don't like this, I should send it back."

"Don't stop reading, dear," with a sweet accent on the "dear." "I forgot you were so much engaged, or I wouldn't have asked your opinion."

Mr. Rudyer cast a look, half reproachful, half irritable at his wife, and then buried himself again in the paper. He had now to go back some distance before he could find his place.

Mrs. Rudyer knew exactly his difficulty, and the moment he began again to read, she looked at him with a mischievous, but merry expression on her face, and, allowing him time to get interested, coughed and cast down her eyes demurely.

A movement of Mr. Rudyer's shoulders and the rustle of the *Times* showed that the shot had told.

"Jonas," said the soft, clear voice of the lady.

"Beatrice, whatever is it now, my dear?"

"Would you like some more coffee, pet?" This was asked very demurely.

"No, thank you, my attentive little wife. No coffee, no tea, no toast, no bread, nothing, thank you. Can I give you anything?"

As Mr. Rudyer said this, he put down the paper with the air of a man with a grievance, and an inclination to pile everything in front of his wife, which that dear, aggravating little woman could possibly want.

"Not just now, Jonas dear, thank you," said she, with assumed unconsciousness.

Mr. Rudyer picked up the *Times* again and vented some of his humor on that journal, by folding it up in a rather vicious manner and then knocking it flat so as to get the report of Jackson *v.* Roberts in position easy

to read. Then he tried once more to get through the case.

But it was not in his nature to feel irritable with his young wife for long; and now instead of reading the report, he began to ask himself whether that last retort of his had not been somewhat harsh and cross. The thought disturbed him.

Had he looked at his wife, he would have seen that there was no regret needed for his speech; for she was enjoying the scene immensely. Her next attack upon the *Times* was of a different kind, and showed how thoroughly she understood her husband.

"Heigh-ho!" It was positively a prodigious sigh.

It was, indeed, a quite too forcible attack, as the citadel capitulated sooner than she expected, and the enemy, looking across at her directly, caught the smile on her lips before she could banish it.

Jonas Rudyer threw down the paper, burst into a laugh, and, jumping up from his chair, went to her side.

"You aggravating, persistent, little tease," he said. "You're only doing this just to worry me. Now, away with the paper, and tell me what it is you want. I can see there's something or other in the wind." And he kissed her.

"Have you finished the case, dear?" she asked, looking up into his plain, round face with a mischievous smile.

"Never mind the case, birdie; let's hear your bother."

"No, you stupid old thing," she replied, kissing him. "I was only teasing you; and if you're a good boy,

you may finish the case now, and then we'll talk. It *is* rather dull when there are only two of us in the room, and one has his head hidden behind a great paper," she said, with a pretty pout.

"Yes, my birdie, I know. I ought to have thought. Look here, I tell you what. I won't have the paper brought to the place until after breakfast. And now look here, what is it? I'm not going to read any more."

Mrs. Rudyer, feeling that she had reduced her husband to a proper condition of compliance, began to unmask her batteries.

"There's nothing particular, doady," said the diplomatic little body. "I only wanted you to talk to me a bit."

"And so I will, my girl. Now about that bacon you spoke of just now. So—"

"You silly old doady," she interrupted, taking his hand, and laughing as she carried it to her lips. "I only said that to make you talk. By the way, Dr. Williams called yesterday afternoon when you were in that horrid city."

"Ah, he's an attentive sort of a chap," replied the husband, "Got his head on the right way, too; the right way for watching the growth of his own interests, I mean. He'd have made a rare salesman with his gift of the gab. What did he want?"

"He said that when he met us last week, he noticed that I was rather pale; so he called quite in a friendly way to see if I was better."

"Ha, ha," laughed Jonas, his round face crinkling up into a hundred furrows, each one sown with smiles.

"That's a good one. I like those professional fellows. They can't canvass for orders, can they? Oh, no, not at all." And he winked and rubbed his hands. "They can only see you looking pale, and then call quite in a friendly way, just to see if you're better. They're deep 'uns, they are."

"Well, Jonas, I thought it was very kind of him. And I should have thought you would like people to take notice of your little wife."

Here was clearly a fresh necessity for a caress.

"Of course I am, birdie; you know that well enough. But don't you think my eyes would be quick to see if anything was the matter with you? But I'm glad he called."

"He didn't think there was anything *much* wrong with me, doady."

"Don't you feel well, really, my dearest child?" And his tone showed he was in earnest.

"Well, I don't feel ill, you know; not positively ill. And so I told Dr. Williams. But I don't feel as I should like to feel."

"And what did Williams say?"

"Couldn't you manage to get away the week after next, if you were to try very hard?" she asked, as she drew a chair for him to sit by her side, and then laid her arms round his neck, and put her pretty face so close to his that her cheek touched his. Then she went on, speaking in a coaxing, caressing voice, like a spoilt and petted child. She was coming to the point.

"Dr. Williams says that your little girl is paler than she ought to be, and that the nasty hot summer air will take all her roses away; and you won't like

that, dearie, will you? And he says that your little girl ought to be taken by her hubby to some place where there is nice fresh air which will blow the roses back again. And I hate this nasty, fusty, musty, dusty, dirty, big London, and I want to go away to where the fields are green and the flowers are sweet. And—don't you interrupt me, you rude old doady," she said, breaking off to stop a protest with a kiss. "How dare you, sir! And then as I was going to say, before my rude hubby stopped me, I know a nice place where we should both be welcome, and where we can go the week after next. I read you the invitation, you know; and then we could have nice long walks together in the fields, and pick the flowers, and get new-laid eggs and fresh milk, and you can carry them—I mean the flowers—and have them for breakfast—I mean the eggs and milk; and you'll know the dear old captain—oh, doady, he is such a dear, dear old man—and you'd find him the best of friends; and then I should be with Margery, whom I've loved all my life at school; and she's the most wonderful girl in the world. And then there's the dear old captain's queer son—poor Godfrey—a crippled dwarf, poor fellow—but such a gentleman, doady, though rather odd; and there's Nan and Guy. And oh, wouldn't it all be lovely? And now you're not to speak, unless you say yes."

And Mrs. Rudyer, who had gabbled out this rather incoherent speech at a great rate, paused for want of breath, and laid her head laughingly on her husband's shoulder.

"So this is it, eh, Trixie, you little puss?" he said,

stroking her golden hair. "How on earth I am to say yes, I can't for the life of me see. And yet I don't want to say no. But I told you that this matter of the company is very important, especially just now."

This referred to certain changes he was making in his business arrangements, which were in a critical state, and called for his constant personal attendance. He tried, therefore, to make this clear to his wife, who did not, however, wish to understand it.

"Do go, doady," she urged persuasively.

"I can't see my way, dear. I want to get things squared up now ; and of course I must see that they are all right and tight, you know."

"When could you go?"

"Not for over a month, at the earliest, little one. When do you want to go?"

"In a fortnight," answered the wife, raising her eyebrows and pouting her lip to express her pretty sorrow.

"Impossible," said Mr. Rudyer.

"Can't you manage it anyhow, doady?"

"No, my girl. I must be in the city then, and for the week following. That's certain. But if we could run down a day or two earlier, I could leave you there, and then come up for the business."

"But we haven't been asked till the Monday, Jonas. Bother the old city!"

"Well, could we manage for you to go down, and then I'll follow you as soon as I can? I shall soon be after you, you bet!"

"I'd rather you were with me when we went down, doady."

And the husband kissed her for the words.

"Very well, it shall be as you wish, whatever the cost. I must run up as soon as I get there, if necessary."

"You dear old thing," laughed the young wife, pleased at having gained her way, and, running to pick up the paper which had been thrown aside, she gave it to him with a laugh. "There's your horrid *Times*. I'll write to Margery to-day."

"I must be off to the city now, girlie," he said. "I'll read it as I drive in."

He rang and ordered his carriage at once; and then the little woman bustled about him, hindering him in getting ready, with her overzeal to help him. But the little attentions pleased, even while they somewhat fidgeted him; and his face wore a very pleasant smile as he ran down the steps. As he drove away in the brougham he waved his hand to her as she stood at the window, full of a sense of happiness.

As soon as the young wife had watched him drive away, she went to her own pretty boudoir and sat down before her desk, and took a sheet of paper to write to Margery Allingham.

But she got no farther than the first line, "My dearest Margery," when her pen stopped, and one of her strange flushes of emotion came over her.

She sat very still and quiet, thinking herself into a condition of sentimental sadness. After a time she took out the letter of invitation which Margery had sent to her—not by any means the first she had received, but the first she had ever thought about accepting—and reading it, stopped at one short sentence amid a good deal of girl's news.

"We have had a visit from an old friend of yours, Bee—a Mr. Dallas, who is editing a paper at Middlingham, about thirty or forty miles from here."

She had not read that to her husband when reading the letter to him ; but now it engrossed her thoughts.

"I wonder—" But the spoken thought got no further.

And when, after a long time, she folded the letter up and put it away, her eyes were full of tears.

CHAPTER VII.

MARGERY'S trials were soon to begin.

The morning following her conversation with the captain, when she awoke, she found Nan had crept into the bed, and held her in her arms.

"Is anything the matter, sis-sis?" whispered Nan lovingly. "But there, I know there is. It was in the air last night; I could tell something was going to happen. What is it? You stopped up a long time plotting with uncle. I know you did, because I waited to say good-night, and I wanted to ask you something. And when you came up-stairs I read it in your face. You didn't see me, though I saw you go into your room; and I saw that something was the matter."

"No, dear, there is nothing—nothing particular," answered Margery, trying to smile.

Nan raised herself on her arm, and looked down into her sister's face, the unbraided masses of her dark hair hanging down over her shoulders and bosom.

"Sis-sis," this was her pet name for Margery, "that is not true. Something is the matter. Listen. I waited a time after you came up-stairs, and then I came and tapped gently at the door; but you took no notice. I peeped in, then, and you were on your knees, and I went away. I waited again, and came and found you

still on your knees. I waited a much longer time, and you were still the same. I knew then that something serious had happened. I said to myself, 'Something must have happened ; Margery doesn't want to pray such an unconscionable time as that.' And when I came back the next time I found you huddled up on the bed with all your clothes on, and you were chilled and looked so miserable. I stole across and looked at your face, and you were sleeping, but not resting, and you'd been crying. At first I thought I would wake you and make you let me sleep with you ; but then I seemed to guess that there was more wrong than I could think of, so I covered you up and went to bed. So now will you tell me what is the matter ? "

"No, Nan, there is nothing—nothing that I can tell you. I was a little upset ; but then one can be upset by good news as well as bad. And happiness is just as disturbing as—as the reverse."

"I see," answered Nan dryly. "So you were suffering last night from excess of delight. Never mind, little mother,"—this was another of Margery's pet names with her brother and sister—"never mind ; don't tell me now. It only hurts you to think how happy you are. I have seen you wince more than once at the mere thought of it. Don't trouble to tell me now if it hurts you. I shall know soon, I'm perfectly sure. I'm glad you are so happy, sis-sis ; but I wish it didn't show itself in such a curious disguise," and with that she put her arms round Margery and caressed her, making her feel how deep and true and staunch was the sympathy felt, though offered in this light-hearted way.

In one sense the episode was useful. It showed Margery the need for constant self-watchfulness. Like the rest in the house, she knew that Nan had very sharp eyes and quick instincts, and feared that the task of keeping the real truth from her would be the hardest of any.

By the time they all met at breakfast, Margery had obtained self-mastery. She was quiet and subdued, and felt as if there were an air of unreality about everything. But the signs of the captain's evident happiness seemed to more than repay her ; although the warmth of his greeting, with the new meaning she read in it, disquieted her a little, while the meeting with Godfrey was full of embarrassment.

All the time, however, she was conscious that Nan's keen eyes, full of loving vigilance, were upon her, noting everything.

Godfrey himself looked very haggard and wretched. His face was drawn and pinched, while his eyes loomed out unnaturally large from the dark circles which surrounded them.

Conversation flagged until Guy began to tell of the results of his morning's fishing—he had been too hungry at first to find time to talk—and then he rattled away in his slangy school-boy style, taking no heed that none of the others, except Nan, were listening.

"You ought to have been there, Nan," he said ; "but you're such a blessed lazybones. Old Mat"—this was the fisherman who looked after the small yacht and the rowing boats which belonged to the Manor House—" was in rattling form. He fairly reeled off some of those old yarns of his, telling whopper after

whopper till the *Flirt* had a regular list to starboard. I never did hear a chap tell such crackers. He's a fair caution. There's only one thing riles me with old Mat; he never will give in that any one ever catches as big fish as he does. This morning I hauled up a regular one-er—a great walloping cod—and I said, 'There you are, Mat; that about takes the cake, I guess.' He picked it up and turned it over and over once or twice, with that beastly sniggering look that he puts on, you know, and said slowly, 'Yes, Mister Guy, that's a nice little fish; fact, it's a nice big fish for a boy to catch, beggin' your pardon; but it ain't azactly the size as sends a man into any sort of flummux. It's a good un for *you*; but, Lor' bless yer, I 'member the once—' and then off he went to tell such a thumping yarn about a kind of whale, that he once caught. You know his 'I 'member, the once,' don't you?" and the young fellow laughed.

"He's a good fisherman," said Godfrey not pleasantly.

"That's more than you are then, Godfrey," retorted Guy. "I 'member the once, as old Mat says, when you went out fishing in the *Flirt*, and all you did was to get jolly ill," and Guy laughed at the recollection.

"I fancy if we all were to ''member the once,' we could turn to a recollection of that kind," said the captain. "When I first went to sea, I was ill for days. Godfrey gets that from me."

Guy never attempted to argue with the captain, and never chaffed Godfrey when the captain came to the rescue. So he was silent.

"I could tell a tale about Guy on that, if I liked,"

laughed Nan. "Poor Guy. It was a dreadful time."

Guy shook his head threateningly at Nan, and whispered to her to "shut up."

"And I should like to know how often 'our only fisher-boy' has come home with no fish, eh, Guy?"

"Oh, yes, that's all jolly well; but a fellow can't always be in luck. And if it comes to tale-telling, I could spin a yarn about Nan and Donald Ramsay on a certain expedition."

"Be quiet, you ridiculous boy," cried Nan, her cheeks reddening, and rising from the table, while Guy burst out laughing.

Godfrey rose at the same time and left the room, and the captain, giving a meaning glance at Margery, went after him.

Margery sat still a few minutes thinking. Then she went away to give some directions about the house, and came back and sat down to do some needlework.

"Marge, come for a sail?" said Guy, breaking in noisily. "You look a bit peeky, and it'll do you good. There's a ripping breeze—a regular soldier's wind. We could have a splendid sail. I want Nan to come, but she says she won't. Even old Crips might be amiable on such a day! It's just spiffing."

"Guy, I wish you wouldn't speak of Godfrey in that way," said Margery. "If he heard you, it would hurt him. You know how sensitive he is about any allusion of the sort. It's not kind, nor like you, to make a jest of him in such a way."

"Crips" was how Guy and Nan often spoke to each other of Godfrey.

The boy stopped short and looked at her, and then gave his falsetto cough to vent his sarcasm and surprise.

"All right, old sobersides; I know you're right. But the chap can't help being a cripple; but if he wasn't so jolly touchy and so jolly thin-skinned about it, it would be a deal better. I don't want to hurt the poor chappy's feelings. But what are you doing up there on such jolly tall stilts? I know 'how sensitive he is to any allusion,' and all that. But, look here Maggot, you're not going to turn lecturer. Here's the whole blessed shanty turned topsy-turvy. Not five minutes ago Nan was on the same tack. 'Don't irritate Godfrey,' and a lot more. I vote we label him, 'This side up. With care. Not to be upset.' It's all just jolly rot."

"Did Nan say anything?" asked Margery, wondering what this might mean.

"Yes, didn't I tell you she did," answered Guy impatiently. "But are you coming for a sail?"

She declined, and he went away; and then Margery began to wonder whether Nan could have guessed anything.

Presently, she went out into the garden, and strolled to her favorite spot, the rosery. She lingered there, feeling very low-spirited, as she moved about among the rose trees picking off the dead leaves and withered blooms.

She was very nervous, waiting for the ordeal that she knew she would have to pass through with Godfrey. She was fearful of the interview, and yet longed to get it over; feeling all the while afraid of being

seen by any of the others until everything should be settled.

This nervousness was not the result of any irresolution. She had made her determination and chosen her path. She was clear in her own mind that she was doing the right thing in seeking to secure the captain's happiness. So firm was her resolve, indeed, that when her thoughts wanted to play truant and recall the many happy scenes she had had with Alan Ramsay in that very spot—especially the last—she put them all away from her by a great effort of will. She meant to be even thought-loyal to the old man's wish.

It was of him that she thought always ; and it was her sense of duty to him that buoyed her up and kept her resolution firm. She longed, however, for everything to be finally settled, and for every one to know about it. When once everybody knew that it was decided, all the reasons that others might use to dissuade her would have lost their force. And by "others," she meant Nan.

She looked out eagerly, therefore, for Godfrey's coming, and watched the house for signs of him.

She saw him at last. He came round the corner of the house on to the terrace, and she noticed that his step was quicker and more springy than usual. He glanced through the open window into the morning-room, and, finding no one there, looked about in all directions.

She showed herself then, by crossing a path in full view of the terrace ; and glancing back through the shrubbery saw him coming towards her, at first quickly but afterwards with slackening steps. She had full

time to observe the expression of his face, herself being unseen, and she noted that he was flushed and excited.

She knew the reason well enough, and her heart sank.

When he reached her his color had faded till his cheeks were as pale as her own, and his nostrils were dilated with his labored breathing as though he had been greatly exerted.

"I was looking for you, Margery," he said, and the words came with an effort, while he looked first at and then away from her in evident agitation.

The girl was to the full as embarrassed as he, but better able to conceal it, and she smiled as she answered:

"Yes. Do you want a rose? I thought you would come out to me, so I picked you the best in all my garden. Let me put it in your coat."

She could feel him trembling as she stood close to him while she put the flower into the buttonhole of his coat and fastened it, her own fingers trembling the while.

Then a somewhat long pause followed, the girl moving nervously about the rose trees and Godfrey standing silent and perplexed close to her.

Suddenly, when she came so near to him that the sleeve of her dress touched him, he turned quickly and caught her hand and held it.

"Is it true, Margery? Can it be true?" The passion that was in him thrilled in the low clear tone in which he spoke.

"Is what true, dear?" she asked, leaving her hand in his.

"What my father tells me," he said. "That you can—that I may tell you how I love you, Margery?"

"Yes, Godfrey, it is all true, my dear," she answered softly.

"And that you can love me; and that you will be no more only sister to me, but promised wife? Is it really true?"

Margery turned white and trembled, but she kept her voice quite steady.

"Yes, dear, promised wife," she whispered, and then bent down and kissed his forehead.

"And only yesterday I felt I could have killed myself in despair. You have saved my life, Margery; and more than that—you have saved my soul. I could have known no God had your love been denied me," and then he poured out in a torrent of words, sometimes almost incoherent in their rushing volume, all the story of his love for her.

But the girl only half heard what he said, for all the time there was running through her mind a curious thought that she had been foolish in dreading the ordeal, and that nothing could have been easier than this promising away of her long-cherished hopes of happiness.

Once she did not think this, however, when Godfrey, carried away by the fervor of his own language and the strength of his feelings, made her bend down to him while he pressed long passionate kisses on her lips.

Then she shuddered.

CHAPTER VIII.

"I say, Nan, this is all jolly queer; what does it mean?"

"What does what mean?" returned Nan.

The two were sitting together in a small room beyond the library, which was called by all of them the sanctum.

"Oh, stash that. You know what I mean well enough. About our Marge and Crips."

"Guy, you must learn to be more respectful in your language, or I shall not consent to listen to you," said the girl, assuming an air of rebuke.

"Look here, don't fool. What *does* it mean?"

"Of course you boys can't understand these—Guy, don't, oh, you great clumsy thing," she cried, as her brother seized her hand, and began to press his knuckles into the back of it.

"Are you going to drop fooling—or shall I have to find the funny bone?" and he moved his hand up to her elbow and pretended to threaten her.

"Go and sit down, then," said Nan. "No, on the other side of the table. That's right, now, what is it?"

"What's all this business about Crips and Marge being engaged?"

"You see, my dear boy,"—this with a matronly air —"before people marry they are generally what is

called engaged. That is to say—now sit still, or I won't say another word. Well, they are engaged, that's all; and some day they'll be married."

"Well, I know all that, fooley, don't I? But what does it mean? What's the game?"

"It is a move on the chessboard of life, which a boy of your years cannot—now don't come near me;" and she jumped up and ran away from him, keeping the table between them.

"I'll pay you for this, young woman, see if I don't, with your chessboards of life. Why can't you give a fellow a plain answer? What does Marge want to marry a chap like that Crips for? Stow your larks, Nan. Do you suppose they're in earnest?"

"Earnest; of course they are. You don't understand the workings of the heart. You will some day, though; and I don't envy the girl that sets your heart working, unless she's as strong as a washerwoman."

"All right," answered Guy, with a loud guffaw. "Don't you talk. Donald knows all about yours, don't you know. I can twig that."

"Let me see, what were you asking?" with an air of indifference.

"Well, seriously. Do you mean that Marge loves Crips enough to marry him? By gum, she's a rum 'un if she does. But you girls are an awfully funny lot. One never knows what you're after. But I'm jiggered if I should have ever thought Marge would have palled on with Godfrey. Is it really settled, Nan?"

"Of course it is. Didn't you hear what uncle himself said at lunch?"

"Yes, I heard it, right enough; but——"

"But what?"

"Well, I couldn't believe it, and that's straight. But I say, why was nothing said to me? I'm head of the family, and have got to look after you two girls. Oh, you may laugh," he said, reddening a little, as Nan burst into a peal of laughter. "But it is so, and you know it. It takes a man to be head of a family; and even if a fellow isn't as old as the girls by a few months, still he's boss, all the same."

"A few months. Why, Margery's seven years older than you, and I'm five, Mr. seventeen-year-old Boss. Do you think the head of the family will forbid the banns?"

"He'll chastise an unruly member of it, if you're not careful," said Guy, laughing. "He can do that part of the bossing properly and effectively, at any rate. But joking apart, Nan, I do think Marge ought to have asked us."

"Asked fiddlesticks," returned Nan energetically. "She ought to have done nothing of the kind."

"Well, I wish she had, at any rate, for then I could have given her a bit of my mind about it. I call the whole thing just beastly rot, that's what it is. Do you think it's all right?"

"I think Margery is right to do just what she pleases," replied Nan, with diplomatic loyalty.

"Oh, of course you two stick together. When did Crips make an ass of himself, I wonder? I thought there was something queer this morning. Old Marge was looking as glum as an empty lamp, and when I spoke of Crips as Crips, she put on that motherly air with

which she used to physic me years ago, and said I mustn't refer to dear Godfrey in that way, as I should hurt his feelings if he heard me. Dear old Marge, she won't hear a word against anybody, but this morning she looked so ghastly solemn that I twigged something was in the wind. But I wish she wasn't going to do this. I thought——"

He stopped short, having spoken with such genuine feeling that Nan looked at him.

"What did you think, Guy?" she asked.

"Why, I thought what you thought. You know you did: that she'd a thundering sight sooner have had Alan Ramsay than Godfrey. And that's just what licks me."

"You're very slangy, Guy," said Nan.

"Oh, yes; and you're very cute, aren't you, turning off the question like that? Well, I'm beastly sorry, whatever you are; and what's more, I'm not afraid to say so."

Nan said nothing, and as a servant entered the room, the conversation dropped.

Although Nan had not expressed her feelings with any such voluble energy as Guy, she was just as much puzzled as he was.

Throughout the rest of the day she watched Margery closely, though she did not mention the subject of the engagement. She was determined, however, to do this when a good opportunity offered for a long undisturbed confidential chat; but, in the meantime, she was anxious to make further observations, and to confirm or destroy her opinion.

In Margery, Nan was sure she could see the signs of

unhappiness. She was acting a part well enough to deceive both the captain and Godfrey, and even Guy, but not to mislead the girl's quicker penetration.

Godfrey, for his part, seemed like one transfigured with ecstasy. He was altogether unlike himself: talkative, cheerful, and laughing; while his eyes followed Margery everywhere. His tale-telling, sensitive face was flushed with a heightened color, and his eyes shone with happiness.

The captain was scarcely less delighted, and his laughter was frequent and boisterous; and he cracked jokes with Nan and Guy about the lovers till the pair both blushed.

After dinner was over and they were all in the drawing-room, he went and fetched down some jewels, and put a necklet of splendid pearls round Margery's neck.

"For Godfrey's wife," he said, kissing her.

Then he turned to Nan and gave her a spray of diamonds and pearls, bidding her put it into her hair at once, to mark one of the happiest days of his life, he said; and to Guy he gave a heavy good watch-chain.

"Godfrey needs nothing," he said, with such a happy smile, as he took Margery by the hand and led her to where his son was sitting. "He has one of the finest jewels out of God's own casket," and he joined their hands and kissed the girl.

Then he called for music, and sat with his arm on the cripple's shoulder, while the girls played and sang, sometimes alone and sometimes together. Now and again he asked for some favorite song, generally from

Margery ; and as her rich, sweet, full contralto voice sang the words and music he loved, the measure of his happiness seemed complete.

He sent them all away to bed early. He was too happy, he said, and must be left alone to get calm. And when Margery lingered a few minutes with him and saw how happy she had made him, she had not a thought of regret for the price which she had paid for it.

When she reached her room, she remembered there was one thing she had yet to do, and she set about it at once. She took from her mother's desk the little packet of what had once been "her treasures"—the trifles that had been dear to her for Alan's sake. She untied the string with quick, nervous fingers and took out the "treasures." She could hardly trust herself to look at them, and fought hard against the temptation to kiss them. She was brave, however, and strengthened her will by thoughts of the captain. The dead flowers she crushed together, and then separating petal from petal, tossed them out into the night air. The little silver coin she threw after them ; and then, after she had feasted her eyes for one hungry minute upon it, she cut the photograph into slips, and burnt them at the gas, scattering the ashes out of the window ; and she burnt even the paper in which all had been wrapped. Then she closed the desk, and began to take down her hair, resolutely determined not to think of the past. But she could not persevere. The love of a life was too strong to be shut down even by her resolute will ; and after a struggle, she sat down in her low arm-chair, and, covering her face with her

hands, yielded herself up to the thoughts that were so strong and so sweet.

After a while she felt two soft, warm arms taking her in a loving embrace, while Nan's voice, sweet and comforting, whispered in her ear:

"Sis-sis, I've come to know what it all means. Trust me, darling."

The touch of sympathy was infinitely sweet after all the trials of the day, and Margery was so glad to feel the girl near her that she burst into tears.

Nan, always clever and tactful, let her cry without saying a word, and then, simply saying that she was going to sleep with Margery, waited till she got her into bed before asking anything more.

"Now, little mother, I mean to know everything," she said.

By this time Margery had recovered something of her self-possession, and was on the defensive.

"What do you mean by everything? What is there to know?"

"You are going to trust me entirely, that's what I mean by everything. You are going to tell me why you have promised to marry Godfrey when—when you love Alan Ramsay."

Her voice sank to a whisper here.

"Hush, Nan, you don't know what you are saying," cried Margery.

"Do you think I don't know what's been going on under my nose?" asked Nan. "Do you think I haven't seen what you think about Alan, and what he thinks about you? Oh, Madge, Madge, you little hypocrite. Now, will you tell me?"

But Margery had covered up her face as if to hide her blushes even in the dark, and said feebly :

"There is nothing to tell."

"Well, I must put it another way, then. Why were you quite yourself last night up to the time when you had that talk with uncle, which made you so miserable afterwards? And why was uncle so wretched up to that moment, and then so full of spirits this morning? And why was Godfrey so excruciatingly dumpy right up to breakfast-time, and then in such a fever of delight afterwards? Are you going to tell me the answer, or leave me to read it for myself?"

"There is nothing to tell, except that Godfrey has asked me to marry him, and I have promised. I'm very tired and sleepy, dear."

"Very well, Margy," said Nan, in a tone of resignation, kissing her, "I won't worry you. I'm going to sleep now. Good-night."

She kissed her again, and turned away as if to go to sleep, and, after a minute, said quietly :

"I can wait till to-morrow, and then I can ask uncle how it is that he was so delighted with what made you so miserable. Good-night."

"Nan! Nan, dearest!" cried Margery, alarmed at the mere threat.

Nan took no notice except to yawn and say good-night again.

"Nan, don't go to sleep. I want to talk to you, Nan."

"What is it? It's my turn to be tired and sleepy now. You're too tired to talk. Go to sleep."

"Don't tease. Turn round and tell me what you want to know."

"If I do, I shall be very hard on you now," said Nan, smiling to herself.

"Turn round, Nan," said Margery, putting her arm over the other.

"Will you promise to answer my questions?"

"I'll try."

"Very well, now," said Nan, turning round and kissing Margery, "tell me first, why have you promised to marry Godfrey?"

"Because he asked me," replied Margery.

"Pouf," with an indignant breath. "Do you love him?"

"We all love him."

"Yes, but we don't all want to marry him," was the quick reply. "I'll put it another way. Do you love Alan Ramsay?"

No answer.

"Do you love Alan Ramsay?"

"Not enough to be his wife."

"Oh, you fibber, you prevaricator, you—Margery! But I know what you mean," she said shrewdly. "You mean not enough to override the other inducements that have prevailed with you. Ah, you may start; but I can see through your flimsy pretenses. Why, that day when Mr. Dallas was here, you showed it so plainly that any one could see it."

Then suddenly, with a rapid and complete change from banter to exceeding tenderness, the girl kissed Margery, and said:

"Nay, sis-sis, open your heart to me, darling. Tell me why you have wrecked your love, and perhaps spoilt poor Alan's life, to make this promise. I'll help

you if you tell me, and you know I'm staunch, don't you? Is it for pity of Godfrey?"

The swift change had conquered Margery, who was nearly in tears.

Nan waited; and, guessing the cause of the other's silence, petted and caressed her.

"I don't think it's that," Nan said, after a while. "It has had something to do with uncle. Is it because you think it will make him happy? Is it?" Her tone was soothingly tender. "Is that what was the matter with him last night? Oh, I think I see now. He must have found out somehow that Godfrey was miserable on your account. Did he tell you that last night? or is it only that uncle thinks he would like you two to marry, and so is pressing this?"

"No," said Margery. "There is no pressure. I have promised cheerfully and readily."

"Yes, with the lips, Madge, but not the heart."

"Yes, with the heart, Nan," said Margery.

"Why, does uncle know anything about Alan, then?" replied shrewd Nan, with a dexterous thrust.

"No," said Margery quickly.

"Then he ought to know, and some one ought to tell him," said Nan decisively.

"No, no, no," cried Margery, "I will not have that."

"But do you think that he would be happy if he knew what he was doing?"

"He would be miserable if Godfrey were not made happy. There is no need for him to know. He shall never know, Nan; there is nothing that he need know. My choice is made. I shall never change. There is

no one in the world whose happiness I so earnestly desire to secure."

"But whose happiness do you expect to secure by a loveless marriage?" asked Nan.

"Godfrey's, uncle's, and so my own." Then after a pause, "Do you suppose there is no higher aim or thought than to do what we wish to do, to eat what we like, to drink what we thirst for, to go where we please, and—to marry whom we wish? I believe it is not only wiser but happier to follow out what a sense of duty prompts."

"People always say that when they can't follow pleasure," said Nan, "But now you are only arguing yourself out of your own doubts. It is not right to fly in the face of inclination as you are doing."

"Whose inclination—Godfrey's or my own?" asked Margery. "If inclination is to be the rule, Godfrey's love for me is stronger than mine for anybody."

"Anybody wouldn't like to hear that," said Nan. She was getting fretful at seeing that Margery was resolute.

"I'll put a question to you, Nan, now. To whom do we three, you and Guy and I, owe everything in the world?"

"To Uncle John," answered Nan promptly.

"What sort of honor would it be, when he has taken us into the house, and Godfrey's life's happiness is risked, and uncle's with it, by the love which he has conceived for one of us, if we were to turn round and refuse to make the only kind of payment that is possible? Would you like to think in years to come that the result of his kindness to us three was that he and

Godfrey were rendered unhappy for life? Do you think there is no happiness for me in thinking that I can avoid that?"

Nan was silent. She had no answer to make for the moment; but she was not convinced.

"I do not say I don't wish it could have been otherwise. I do; I wish it with all my heart. I don't say I shall not have flashes of regret and perhaps unhappiness. But I shall at least know that I have helped to ease the last years of life for him who has made life bright for all of us. That thought will always comfort me."

"But what of Alan?" asked Nan.

"Don't, Nan. Try to help me to be strong, darling; for I shall need all the help I can get."

"I don't like what you are doing, sis-sis," said Nan, tenderly. "I don't believe you are right. I don't believe it will be for the happiness of all. And if I can prevent it and yet be true to you, I shall—for your sake. But no one else shall ever say a word against it; and if I can help you, you shall never be in want of help. But I don't like it."

They kissed each other as if it were a compact, and soon after fell asleep in each other's arms like two children—Nan holding Margery in her embrace.

CHAPTER IX.

"Well, my dear, of course it's no business of mine, but whatever has persuaded you to get engaged to poor Godfrey? Your men folk must be a wretched bad lot about here," and Mrs. Rudyer laughed. She had been at the Manor House two days, and was sitting alone with Margery in her room.

Seeing that Margery made no reply and did not look pleased, she said:

"You mustn't mind what an old married woman like me says. Just imagine either that I'm your confessor, or that we're back in the old days at school. Whatever did you do it for?"

"What do people generally get engaged for?" asked Margery, putting aside her vexation, and smiling. She was fast developing her capacity to mask her feelings, and the few days which had passed since the engagement had reconciled her to the position and the prospect.

"Well, my dear, I got engaged for money," said Mrs. Rudyer candidly; "but you're not the girl to do that. At least, you weren't; of course you may have changed. But you always used to have ideas—I mean quixotic ideas—about romance and love and fiddlesticks of that sort."

"And you?"

"We're not talking about me, Margery, but about you," replied the other, dropping her eyes, and reddening very slightly.

"What could I do, Bee, if no one would ask me?" said Margery.

Mrs. Rudyer looked at the girl keenly for a minute without a word.

"Do you mean to tell me this is a love match?"

"Do I look like an heiress to be married for my wealth? Or am I a woman ready to sell—to marry for money?"

"Sell yourself, you were going to say. Say it, dear; you won't hurt my feelings. I've told you I did sell myself." She spoke with quite unnecessary vehemence. "No, you don't," she added, answering Margery's question. "That's what I say. It beats me; for if you love him, I'll eat him. You're a curious girl, Margery."

The friends had not met for some time, and the difference in the lives of each had hastened the development of the differences of disposition, until much of the old affection was gone. The news of the engagement had surprised Mrs. Rudyer a great deal, and she was curious to get at the secret history of it. But Margery had no inclination to tell her, and no intention.

Nan, who had never liked Beatrice, had resented strongly some questions the latter had put to her on the subject, and had not hesitated to show her feelings.

Mrs. Rudyer was not disconcerted. She had gone down to the Manor House with one set purpose, and

she determined to carry it through. She wanted to meet Hugh Dallas again, and was both perplexed and annoyed when no mention was made of him.

"By the way, you wrote something in your letter, Margery," she said once, "about some old friend of mine. Who was it? You didn't mention any name. Who was it?"

She said this, thinking it showed her to be absolutely uninterested.

"Yes, surely I must have mentioned the name, Bee," answered Margery. "It is Mr. Dallas."

"Oh, I must have forgotten it if you did. I remember him—at least I think I do," and she knitted her brow as if in thought. Margery knew nothing of Hugh Dallas's proposal. "Is he nice? How did he come here?

Margery flushed at the association of ideas suggested by the question.

"Yes, we all liked him. By the way, did you or do you ever see anything of Rose Spencer?" she asked, turning the talk into a safer channel, and keeping it there, much to Mrs. Rudyer's chagrin.

The latter was unwilling to refer to the subject lest she should seem to be thinking of Hugh Dallas, and so run a risk of attracting the attention of the others.

When nothing was said for a day or two, she began to fear that her visit would be fruitless, and to meditate a run over to Middlingham, the town where Dallas's paper was published. As a matter of fact, she was rather bored at the Manor House. The house was dull for her. Nan she did not care for; Margery had disappointed her; the captain was not a character

with whom she had much sympathy, and Godfrey she couldn't understand. Guy was thus the only person with whom she found much real enjoyment, and he voted her an "awfully jolly little woman." They played tennis, and boated, and walked together, till Nan declared the boy's head would be turned. He too enjoyed the time, however, and as Mrs. Rudyer never cared about the consequences to other people, provided she was pleased, they were both well satisfied.

A change came, however, after a few days, and came suddenly.

Mrs. Rudyer and Guy had been boating one morning, and had landed at a small village about a couple of miles up the coast. There they met Margery, who had been visiting a sick woman, the wife of a fisherman, and Mrs. Rudyer said that she would walk back with Margery, while Guy could take the boat back.

This plan was adopted, and the two started on the return walk.

On the way, there was a cottage at which Margery wished to call—since her engagement she had thrown herself even more heartily than before into her parish work—and Mrs. Rudyer, to whom the "stuffy and smelly rooms"—so she termed them—were disagreeable, did not go in, but strolled very slowly through the little village, and then turned aside to wait on the edge of the cliff.

Her stock of patience, never large, waned very quickly, and after she had tried to make out Guy, and looked at one or two steamers that were passing out at sea, and had glanced first one way and then another, she turned, with a petulant exclamation, "wondering

what on earth Margery wanted to loiter in a lot of dirty cottages for," to go back in search of her.

As she reached the roadside she started and changed color, for she came face to face with Hugh Dallas.

For a moment she was overcome with confusion, but quickly recovered herself, and then was delighted.

"Mr. Dallas," this in a tone of surprise, and then holding out her hand, "how are you? You have not forgotten me?"

Hugh Dallas could not suppress the signs of astonishment at finding her in such a place. He gave her his hand.

"I confess I am astonished. Not that one need be surprised at anything in this world. But—" He looked the question which he did not phrase.

"How do I come to be here? I can see the question in your face. I am staying down here with my old friend Margery Allingham, at Captain Drury's. You know them and are probably going there. I heard that you were settled in the neighborhood." She blushed slightly as she said this, and shot a glance up at him to see how he took it. "I am glad indeed to —to see you again." She did not like the look in his eyes as he turned them on her.

Hugh Dallas, however, seemed to be not quite at ease, and Mrs. Rudyer was glad to think that he was so disquieted at seeing her again. It flattered her.

But she was flattering herself without a cause. He was not much moved at seeing her again, although his first surprise had been considerable. His hesitation came from quite a different cause. He and Alan Ramsay were on their way to the Manor House, and the

latter, when passing through the village, had caught sight of Margery, whom he guessed was alone. Hastily he had arranged with Hugh Dallas that the latter should go away and lose himself so that Alan might have an uninterrupted opportunity of resuming that conversation which had been broken off in the rosery. Dallas had fallen in with the plan quite enthusiastically.

"It's a magnificent chance; you can't walk it under half an hour, old fellow," he said. "I'll take care to loiter away an hour at least, so that you'll have no end of opportunity. I'll go and lose my way somewhere, and you stop and don't leave go till you've got your yes. Don't blush, old man." And with that Dallas had walked away.

But when he met Mrs. Rudyer he had a double difficulty. He had no mind for an hour's private conversation with her, and he didn't suppose she would want anything of the sort with him. But, on the other hand, he did not want to spoil Alan's chance; and the only means of accomplishing that was for both Mrs. Rudyer and himself to "get lost" together. With a laugh in his sleeve at his action he determined to make the attempt, and, to his surprise, when he began to walk away from the high-road, he found the lady more than willing to go with him.

This amused him immensely, and did much to restore his customary equanimity.

"Rum thing meeting like this," he said, with a smile.

"Is that all the impression it makes on you?" she asked, turning her pretty face for a moment in his direction.

"What's the regulation sort of impression?" he asked.

"It's five years since we met," she said, with a sigh.

"Rum thing, too, I don't even know your name yet," and he smiled again, this time with genuine amusement; but his companion colored with vexation.

"Mr. Rudyer is down with me at the Manor House."

"Oh, yes, of course. I had heard it. Stupid of me to forget it. But I have such a busy time of it with such heaps of names to keep in my mind, that this got crowded out. Let me see, he's in soap, or pickles, or jam, or something of that kind, isn't he? I did hear."

"He's not *in* anything," was the reply, somewhat sharply spoken. "Except in a company."

"Oh, I see. I beg your pardon. I forget these things so." He spoke indifferently, and Mrs. Rudyer was deeply nettled. "What a splendid view of that foreland we get from here. Do you see that?"

He stopped and pointed to a brown bluff headland which stood out from the shore some little distance away.

Mrs. Rudyer did not even pretend to look at it.

"Ah, I suppose you know the spot well," he said, observing this.

She stamped her foot suddenly and petulantly, and looked at him.

"Do you mean to insult me?" she cried.

"Insult you? Certainly not. Nothing further from my thoughts."

"Then why do you talk in that way? We haven't met for over five long years, and you've nothing better

to speak of to me than a business I didn't understand, and a nasty old rock that I don't care a rap about."

"I'm very sorry, I'm sure; but you see our range of topics may be said to be somewhat limited. Our last conversation broke off at a point that can scarcely be resumed under our present circumstances—at least not with much practical advantage," he said dryly.

"You are cruel. I wish I had not seen you again." she said vehemently, and turned away from him.

"Isn't this a trifle unnecessary?" he asked, following her.

"You are horrid. I wish I had never seen you again. You are so different from what I thought you would be. And if I had never seen you, I should never have known it." Tears of mortification and disappointment filled her eyes.

Dallas could never bear to see a woman in tears.

"I am sorry my clumsy banter has upset you. I did not intend to hurt your feelings," he said seriously. But the next minute he laughed as he added, "But surely you see that we have stumbled on an awkward situation, and that the best thing we can do is to laugh our way out of it."

"No, I don't see it at all. This meeting is no laughing matter to me. But men change their feelings as they can their hats."

"Or women their engagement rings," said Dallas; and this pleased her, as it was the first remark which had shown that he was at all sensitive about the past. "But do let us be sensible. I don't mean that this meeting is necessarily a laughing matter—that's only a play on the words. The absurdity is that we should

either of us think of referring without a laugh to the time when we met before."

"Of course," she said, with a curl of the lip, "five years would be far too long for any serious feeling to survive."

"Precisely. That is my meaning to a hair's breadth," he answered, pretending to take her seriously.

"You are very much changed," said Mrs. Rudyer, flashing a look of angry irritation at him.

He smiled as, looking down, he met her eyes.

"Do let us be sensible," he returned. "Don't you know the story of a man in the days of 'once upon a time,' who, when his daughter or his wife or somebody who was dear to him died, had her heart taken out and shut up in a casket. He mourned or maundered over it for a season, and then, going out into the world, left it and forgot all about it, till one day, years afterwards, coming on it by accident, he opened the casket to see what remained of the heart, and found there was—nothing there. Wise man that he was, he admitted to himself that he was immensely relieved at the result, and wondered how he could have been such a fool in the past."

"Oh, he was immensely relieved, was he?" said Mrs. Rudyer.

"Prodigiously; so says the fable."

"I suppose you think that's a clever way of telling me what you feel now." She did not look at him as she spoke.

"Journalists have a knack of wrapping up things. I am a journalist, you know."

"Some journalists must be very unpleasant creatures,

if they don't answer questions more plainly than you do."

"Maybe; but you see we're always dodging some clause or other of the Libel Act, and have to let the truth appear without breaking the law. It's good practise."

"I don't think so," said Mrs. Rudyer, almost crossly. "If you've got anything to say, I think you should say it."

"Ah, you'd make a bad journalist then. The greatest of all literary powers is that of suggestion."

"And I suppose you think your empty casket story is a clever piece of suggestion; leaving me to apply it."

"Not altogether bad for an impromptu, perhaps. A bit crude, but not without force."

"You are changed, indeed," she said, again. "Years ago you would have found something better to say than a lot of insulting suggestions." She was getting very angry in her disappointment. "I declare I'm almost inclined to believe that there's something injurious in the air of the provinces. Everybody seems changed, and changed for the worse," and she jerked up her head as if to give emphasis to the opinion.

"Ah, a very small flaw in the mirror will throw the reflection of what we see in it out of all proportion."

"I suppose you're digging at me again with another suggestion that I am changed and not the others. That's nonsense; I never in my life went to a place with happier anticipations than I came with to the Manor House—and now, everything's horrid," and

her voice sounded as if tears of vexation were not far off.

"I am sorry," began Dallas, with commonplace courtesy.

"You're not sorry a bit, and you know it. You don't care a bit, not a scrap. You said so; or suggested it—which is worse. You're worse than Margery, and she's not a bit like herself. Ever since her engagement——"

It was Dallas's turn to interrupt now.

"Her what?" he cried.

"Her engagement to Godfrey Drury. Why, whatever's the matter?" She looked up in astonishment as her companion's feelings found vent in a whistle. "Is that another suggestion?" she asked, with a curled lip. "Does it mean that you are surprised? Because I was, I can tell you. I'm sure there's something behind, though what it is I can't find out. Is there anything unexpected?"

Hugh Dallas had let her run on in this way, partly because he was too surprised to say much, and partly to hear all that she might have to say. But he determined to tell her nothing. It was quite evident to him that discretion was not a strong point in Mrs. Rudyer's character.

"I did not know of the engagement. But that is only because I am not here much. As for being surprised—of course, one is surprised at any one getting engaged."

"What a nasty little sneer," said the lady. "I believe it only dates from a day or two back. But they are such a curious couple to fall in love with one an-

other; and Margery declares and sticks to it that it's a regular love match. It's curious, isn't it?"

"You mean that you think it ridiculous that any two people should marry merely because they love each other—or think they do? I agree with you."

"Oh, you are horrid. You know I don't mean anything of the kind. I mean that it's extraordinary that such a girl as Margery should marry such a poor fellow as Mr. Godfrey."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. Yes, it is extraordinary—especially if they are not in love with one another and if he is not very wealthy. But it must be one or the other, I should think."

"Did that man when he found the empty casket stamp on it, and kick it, and spit on it, and try to thump holes in it?"

"Good," cried Dallas. "You have scored a point. He wisely buried it and went about doing his ordinary work, and so forgot that he had ever even looked inside. And now that we've settled that and thoroughly understand each other, let us hasten on to the Manor House. I am anxious to hear the news."

This was very true. He was very anxious to know what had chanced to Alan.

CHAPTER X.

Alan Ramsay had been delighted at the chance which luck had thrown in his way of getting a quiet half-hour alone with Margery. During the whole of his yachting trip he had been dwelling on the incident of that interrupted conversation in the rosery, where he had seen what he judged to be positive proofs that Margery cared for him.

He had declared to himself, and to Hugh Dallas when the two met, that he would use the first opportunity he could find or make to get her to promise to be his wife.

He waited restlessly for her to come out of the cottage and, thinking to prepare for her all the greater surprise, he sauntered a few steps along the village to a point where the road made a turn, and took up a position from which he could watch her approach, himself being unseen.

His heart beat high with anticipated pleasure, though he felt a little nervous, as he kept his eyes fixed on the cottage door where he had seen her.

She came out at length and looked about her.

"Looking for me," thought Alan, smiling to himself. "Didn't think she saw me."

He was wrong, of course. Margery was looking for Mrs. Rudyer, and, feeling at a loss to know where the

latter could be, walked slowly on, casting her eyes about her for some signs of the other.

"Looks pale," thought Alan, "and thoughtful. But I fancy I can change that. Hope nothing's up. Dear Margery, I love you, I love you, I love you," he whispered, under his breath, "but I don't feel quite as plucky about telling you so as I should like to. I don't believe she did see me, after all; that's not the sort of look I'm accustomed to see on her face when she's thinking of me; and not the look I want to see, either. Now for it, Alan," he said, as Margery approached close to the spot where he was, and he walked quickly to her.

There was no doubt she had not been thinking of him. She changed color, or rather, all vestige of color left her face, and even her lips; she stopped and looked at Alan as if overcome with sudden fear Then she made a great effort at self-recovery, and put out her hand to take that which Alan held stretched out toward her.

"Why, Margery—Miss Allingham, are you not well?"

"No, yes. I mean, you startled me. I was not expecting you. I was looking for a friend."

"A friend!" he said, emphasizing the word. "Am I not—?"

"I mean, my friend Beatrice, Mrs. Rudyer," she interposed, "an old school-fellow. She is staying down at the Manor House with us, and we have been out walking—I mean, she is walking back with me, and Guy took the boat back; and then I left her a minute to go and see some people in the village here, and I

don't see her. I want her. I must look for her. She is strange, and may lose her way, and then, of course, I should be blamed, and I don't know what would be said. Excuse me, won't you, I must run and look for her."

The poor girl had gabbled out this long, broken, scrappy speech as fast as possible, not to let Alan have a chance of putting in a word; and at the end she turned and walked back toward the village, leaving Alan aghast with surprise.

Margery was so confused and indeed distressed at the meeting that she did not quite know what to do. She was afraid of being alone with Alan—afraid of him, and of what he might say; but more afraid of herself and her weakness in his presence. If Beatrice could only be found, she thought, it would be all safe.

But Mrs. Rudyer at that moment was a good half-mile from the spot, and without a thought of Margery.

Alan breathed a silent but fervent prayer that the lady might really have lost her way; but he certainly could not understand Margery's intense solicitude on the other's account.

"She's a kind little soul to think of the other in this way," he thought, "but I don't think she need be *quite* so anxious." Then a smile broke slowly over his face. "Of course, it's the first time we've been alone since that little business in the rosery; and, maybe, she can give a pretty shrewd guess at what's coming. Dear little heart!" And with that he walked after her.

"Is it very necessary that we should find your friend?" he asked, when he caught her up; and he saw her now turn as red as before she had turned

white. "Good sign that," was his mental comment.

"It is very necessary that I should find her, Mr. Ramsay. I simply dare not go back without her," and this was more correct than he guessed. "But I don't want to keep you," she said; and strive as she would she could not make her manner of saying that appear other than diffident.

"Where you are, I stop," he answered frankly, drawing confidence from her manner, "unless you send me away. And the longer your friend takes in finding herself again, the better I shall be pleased." A smile lighted up his handsome face as he said this.

But Margery did not smile.

"I really think you—you had better not stay. I have several cottages I can call and stay at here until Mrs. Ruyder comes back."

"Then I'll wait for you, as I have often waited before, or better still, we'll go to the places together, and we'll charter a small boy or two to keep a lookout.

"I'd rather be alone," said poor Margery, in consternation at this proposition.

"Yes, I know, of course you would," answered Alan, with quite boisterous confidence; "but I could not be so rude as to leave you."

He said this in the tone which plainly enough declared that he understood her to mean this as a sort of propriety protest, but nothing to which he had the remotest intention of heeding.

Margery began to give up the struggle then, and set her defenses in order for what she felt was now more likely to come.

She wanted time to recover complete reassurance, and to gain it she took up a position too near to some cottage doors for anything except commonplaces to be spoken, and stayed there as if waiting for Mrs. Rudyer's return. Her belief was that the latter, growing tired of waiting, had walked on in the direction of the Manor House, thinking that Margery would follow and overtake her. Thus a moment's thought made her see that the sooner they started the sooner they would catch up Mrs. Rudyer.

"I think we had better go now," she said, when she felt that she had recovered her composure sufficiently, and she started the walk at a quick speed, thinking shrewdly enough that not only would that cover the distance sooner, but also that it would check any tendency of the conversation to get on to dangerous topics.

She did not know whether her companion had yet heard of her engagement to Godfrey ; but whether he had or not the subject must be a most embarrassing one. If he had, she feared his reproaches ; if he had not, she naturally preferred that he should hear of it from some one else, and this he would be sure to do the moment he came in contact with any one from the Manor House. Thus all her anxiety was to get out of the present difficulty.

Walking very quickly under the pretext that she must make as much haste as possible to catch up Mrs. Rudyer, she started the topic of parish work, and talked as if her life depended on no break occurring in the conversation.

Alan let her run on in some wonderment ; but he set

it all down to her nervousness about having the rosery talk continued. But her anxiety and haste did not alter or lessen his determination one jot. He was quite prepared to make an opportunity if needful, and he walked along by her side, casting occasional glances at her as he answered in monosyllables, while he chuckled with quiet, pleasurable self-congratulation at what he believed to be the cause of her nervous manner; and thinking how best to make the opportunity he needed.

He had no need to make an opportunity, however. The fates fought for him.

Margery was secretly rejoicing at the quick rate at which they walked, and was beginning to look out confidently for signs of Mrs. Rudyer, when she trod on an awkwardly-shaped rolling-stone, which gave way suddenly beneath her foot, and let her down with a nasty twist of the ankle. She gave a sharp cry, and might have fallen had she not made a quick clutch at her companion's arm.

Alan caught her readily and willingly, and thus almost before she understood what had happened she was standing with one hand holding his arm, while his other arm was thrown round her as an additional, if not altogether needed support.

Despite all that it meant in the destruction of her plans, and despite also the pain from her ankle, she could not help smiling. She loved the man, and the sense of his support and protection was infinitely sweet.

"If you are not much hurt, Margery, I shall say it serves you right, for treating me thus," he said, smiling in his turn, while his face was aglow with love.

In an instant she had recovered herself, and, though her ankle gave her acute pain, she drew away and stood alone.

"It is nothing," she said; but her looks denied her words, for she turned pale and could scarcely stand.

"You are in great pain, I can see," he said gently. "You had better rest on my arm. There is no other possible leaning post near." He added this as he saw her glance round as if looking for some support.

She was beaten, and knew it, but still made a brave effort, though she could scarcely trust herself to move a step unaided.

"It is nothing. It will be better in a moment. I want to get home. I shall be able to walk directly."

It was so humiliating, she thought, to have done such a stupid thing, that she was angry with herself.

"You will have to take my arm," said Alan quietly. "And you had better do so at once. It hurts me to see you suffering as you are. Come."

He took her hand as he spoke and drew it through his arm, and she no longer resisted him.

"Now, lean on me as heavily as you can, and let us try whether you can walk in that fashion. It will be slow work, but I shan't mind that," he said, looking down lovingly. "Besides, it will make up for your having teased me by hurrying so just now."

Margery did not answer, but tried to hobble along as well as she could, in a fever of impatience and nervousness, and fighting all the time against a feeling of rare delight at being with him.

"Take my stick," he said, after a step or two. "There, that's better. Are you in much pain?"

"No, it's getting better, but I can hardly bear to touch it."

"Never mind. It only means that we shall be a little longer in getting to the Manor House. But that won't matter much, will it? We've been out often enough for no one to think about that. And I think the captain would trust you with me, eh?" and he laughed again with that air of reckless confidence that all was well.

"It's not of uncle that I was thinking," said Margery, rather feebly, wishing to let him know the truth and yet afraid to tell him. "I don't think Godfrey will be pleased." Her face went scarlet as she mentioned his name.

But Alan laughed gleefully, and rather boisterously.

"Well, I don't think one need bother one's head about Godfrey. He's a good fellow in his way, and, I've no doubt, awfully correct in his propriety notions. But you and I are scarcely going to begin now to worry about his permission when to go out or come in. Why, it'll he Guy next, or perhaps Don, will be giving me a lecture."

"Don't," said Margery.

"Very well. I won't say another word about that. I've something else to say, now. Hadn't you better rest a bit by this gate?"

"Don't say anything now," said Margery. "I'm not well."

"But what I'm going to say won't hurt your health, Margery. It has been half said already," he continued, taking no notice of her further protests and attempts to speak, "and the half answer you gave me,

though unspoken, has been in my thoughts all the time I've been on Tremayne's yacht. You can guess what I mean, can't you, Margery? It's only what I began to say that day in the rosery. That I love you and want you for my wife."

When he had begun this speech, and Margery felt that she could not stop him, she had turned away, and, resting an arm on the top bar of the gate, held her hand over her face.

The bitterness of that moment was supreme. Till then she had not even faintly realized the price she had had to pay for old John Drury's happiness. She listened with a pain that held her silent, and seemed as if she had to fight for strength to play out her part. Not till the moment when she was to say the words which were to make her appear false and heartless had she realized how infinitely dear was his love, how essential to her very life was his good opinion.

When he stopped and stretched out his hand to take hers, she found courage and strength to face him.

She turned and looked at him, and he was almost frightened by the look of suffering that he saw on it and mistook the cause.

"You are ill, my darling," he cried passionately, "and here am I like a selfish brute losing myself in talking of my love."

"Stop, stop; please stop talking in—in that way. Listen to me. I—I must not listen to you. Something has happened that you do not seem to know of. I—"

"I care nothing for what has happened, if you love me as you did the last time we stood alone together,"

he burst out when she paused through nervousness. He was all confidence and impetuosity.

"Don't, please don't. Please say no more. I thank you—I do indeed—I thank you for asking me—to be your wife. But I cannot. I am—" The words stuck in her throat.

"You cannot say you don't love me, Margery. You—"

"Don't; you must not say such things. I must not listen. I—I have promised to marry—Godfrey."

She was white to the lips and deadly cold, and held the gate to prevent herself from falling; and she was afraid to look him in the face.

There came a long pause, during which she just glanced up at his face, which bore a mystified expression; and she dropped her eyes at once on finding his fixed upon her face with a good-humored, inquiring look.

"Don't be frightened, child," he said, so kindly and gently that involuntarily she looked at him and began to feel warm again. "I suppose there is some meaning to this, but I don't see it yet. I must ask you one question, if I die for it. Look at me. Nay, I am not going to be violent or terrible; but I want you to look at me. That's right," as she raised her eyes. "Now, do you or do you not love me? Can you say you do not?"

The pale face turned a glowing crimson, and the light flashed into her eyes as she dropped them before the love look he bent on her.

But she said nothing.

"I am answered," he said. "And now listen to

me, for I am in deadly earnest. On my word I knew nothing of this engagement, or I would never have said a word. I am glad you believe that," he said, in answer to a gesture. "I only got back this morning, picking up Dallas on the way, and I have seen no one to give me even a hint of this. But I am glad I have said it."

She looked up, and he understood the glance.

"You must hear me out. It isn't much I ask, considering what I've lost. I am glad I spoke, because, without the possibility of doubt or mistake, you will know that—what I feel for you; just as I know what your feeling is for me. But I'll never speak of this again unless"—and he dropped his voice—"you should ever be free. I don't think you can quite understand all that this may mean to me—I don't know that I should care for you to know. But I do want you to know what I think of you."

She started nervously and looked at him, and he smiled.

"You're not a girl to do this without strong reason. You're not made of the sort that find a pleasure in spoiling a fellow's happiness and breaking his life. I know that, and I can therefore tell you that the reason which is good enough for you, Margery, is good enough for me. I was ready to trust all my chance of happiness in your care, and I'm ready to swear now that you wouldn't put all that aside without thinking you're doing what you believe to be a higher duty. Of course, I shall know your reason some day, and when I do I'm just perfectly sure that it's something that will only make you dearer than ever in my eyes. So you see

I can't take this as some other fellows might; but it isn't that I don't feel it."

He stopped, and the girl's heart was too full for her to speak.

She looked once into his face and held out her hand, and when he gave his she pressed it in silence.

"I think I understand what you would say. You trust me, and that's enough for me, and on my honor I'll never betray it."

He had held her hand while he spoke, and when he finished he raised it to his lips and kissed it.

"The past is past, Margery," he whispered, looking earnestly at her. He waited a minute, and then spoke in a lighter tone. "And now we'll just pull ourselves together and think about getting on with our walk. I think, if you don't mind, I should like to smoke. You see, a cigar helps a fellow out of a mess, and helps him get his scattered wits together. You'd be astonished, Miss Allingham, if you knew what a cigar can do as a cheerer, or a pipe—a pipe's even better. Hugh Dallas swears by a pipe too. What a good sort Hugh is. You must get to know more of him. I do think he's one of the most even-tempered, level-headed fellows breathing, and as staunch, by Jove, as a—as, what shall I say?—as a handcuff. Now, then, shall we make a move?"

He gave her his arm again, and they walked slowly on, Alan Ramsay talking at a rate he had never talked at before, to give the girl time to recover herself.

Soon the pain was easier, and they were able to make better speed. In this way they walked about half a mile, and were drawing near to a row of cottages.

"How would it be for you to wait in one of the cottages while I get some kind of trap from the Manor House or somewhere, to finish the journey?"

"I think it would be better."

"Good! I answered Alan. "We'll manage tha.." Then he stopped suddenly and uttered a short exclamation. He was looking ahead, while Margery's eyes were on the ground.

"What is it?" she asked, looking up to him.

"Nothing. I see the captain and Godfrey coming this way, that's all. Now we shall be able to manage splendidly," he added cheerfully.

But Margery was frightened, and showed it. She waited a minute and then said nervously:

"You won't—let anything—of what we spoke about just now make—make any difference?"

"Difference," he cried, guessing partly her meaning. "Why should it?—not a scrap."

"Thank you." She spoke with evident relief in her voice, and felt less dismayed at the prospect of meeting the others.

CHAPTER XI.

Godfrey's face wore such a dark, forbidding look at the unexpected sight of Margery walking arm in arm with Alan Ramsay, that the latter noticed it with something very much like dismay.

"Why, whatever's the matter, Margery?" cried old John, his eyes alight with sympathy and concern at seeing that the girl was limping along painfully.

"I'm in sore trouble, uncle," answered Margery, leaving Alan and going to her uncle. "I've lost Beatrice, and have sprained or ricked my ankle. You must be my crutch now. Mr. Ramsay has helped me along till I am afraid he must be tired. Fortunately he was there at the time, or I don't know what I should have done."

"Very fortunate, indeed," said Godfrey, with an emphasis that suggested a sneer. "I hope Margery has not really tired you, Mr. Ramsay?"

He said this to assert his right to speak on her behalf, and he spoke with considerable force.

"Not a bit," answered Alan, with a tone of assumed indifference, which Dallas himself could not have improved upon. "Fact is, I was rather glad to be a bit of use. Nasty thing a sprain; and it just makes all the difference whether you ease the joint at once. I was just saying to Miss Allingham that I thought she had better rest in one of these cottages while I went

to get a trap somewhere, when happily we caught sight of you. And as I knew that under the altered circumstances"—he smiled as he said this to Godfrey, who understood him and flushed—"you would be anxious to take charge, I was relieved."

Margery would have thanked him with a glance for this, but he did not even look in her direction.

Godfrey remained dissatisfied, however, and he was unable to prevent his suspicions showing in his looks.

"It's a pity you did not get some sort of conveyance before, Margery," he said, somewhat sharply. "To walk so far as this on a sprained ankle is bad for the sprain—and everything else."

"Let's hope it will be all right now," said the captain. "But I should think Alan's idea is the best; and you'd better wait here, Madge, while some of us fetch the means of driving you home."

Alan Ramsay immediately volunteered to go to the Manor House, and went. He was glad to be alone, so as to let drop the mask with which he had hidden the intense bitterness which the disappointment had caused him.

"I wonder where Hugh's got to?" was his first thought. "We must have a chat over this thing together. What the dickens can be Margery's reason?" Then he gave a deep sigh. "Poor Margery! She can't love that little beggar, and what a look he gave when he came up. Gad, one might have thought he was going to cut my head off. And what a tone to speak to her in. She might have been a servant. I wonder who's set all this blessed business agog? I'll take my oath that when I all but asked her that day

in the rosery, she was going to say yes. There's no reason why she shouldn't—at least, there *was* no reason. There *is* now, by Jove. But she loves me. I'm as certain of that as I am of anything in this world. I know it," and his confidence showed itself in a smile. "But what am I to do? I don't want to have to go away; and yet, it'll be wretched to stop here and know she's tied to another fellow. I'm hanged if I can see the way. Confound the little beggar!"

Muttering to himself on the way, he made all haste to the Manor House and sent off a carriage to fetch Margery home. Then he went to try and find Hugh Dallas. He was not successful in this, and roamed about somewhat aimlessly and very disconsolately until, on returning to the Manor House, he met his friend in the grounds.

"I am sorry, Alan," said Dallas.

"How did you know?" asked the other in surprise, understanding him.

"I should have known when I found Miss Allingham waiting for a carriage which you had gone away to fetch and not to return with. I was there when it came up. But, in fact, I had heard beforehand about the engagement."

"Heard? How? From whom?"

"It turns out that there is a Mrs. Rudyer stopping here. I knew her some time ago. She told me all about it."

"All?"

"Well, no; not all. All she knows and thinks. The first's not much, the second is. But she wanted to pump me."

"What does she think?"

"That Miss Allingham is not marrying for love and isn't the girl to marry for money; so that it's a poser. See?"

"And what do you think, Hugh?"

"Well, I rather take little Mrs. Rudyer's notion. Women are pretty sharp in seeing whether other women do or don't love."

"Yes; but what can be the motive, then?"

"Oh, that's as clear as a fire on a frosty night. Gratitude."

"Gratitude! What, to that—to Godfrey Drury?"

"Not at all. To the old captain."

"I never thought of that. But where can he have come in? You don't think he'd—" He left the sentence unfinished, and looked inquiringly at his friend.

"Force the girl to marry?" said Dallas. "No, I don't. I believe he'd cut his tongue out first. No, no. She's got hold of the idea somewhere and somehow that this business will please him, and she's gone for it straight away. Some women are awfully queer in that way; and they think it's wrong to do what pleases them, and that the good they do is to be measured by the misery which they themselves feel. I haven't a shadow of a doubt that that girl—staunch, brave, true-hearted little woman as she is—has chucked away her happiness with about as much reluctance as I should toss a box of good cigars into the fire, just because she fancied she could make the old captain happy by marrying the son. Yet she might have thought a little more of the man whose happiness she was chucking away at the same time."

"Don't say that, Hugh, don't say that. I don't question her right to do as she pleases—just exactly as she pleases."

Dallas was lighting a cigarette, and looked up at Alan as he spoke, holding the lighted match till it burned his fingers.

"You take it well, old man. Some fellows would have felt nasty over a spill of the kind. I did, for one."

"You? Have you ever—?"

"Been through the mill? Yes, I know what it is to be ground small between the upper stone of regret and the nether one of humiliation."

"I know no humiliation," answered Alan, with quick loyalty; "it will make no difference to my feelings. I know she cared for me; that's enough. I shall never change to her."

"The other said she cared for me as well; and I thought I should never change. But I thought I was a bigger fool than I really was. But then," he added quickly, covering a remark which he knew would grate on the other's feelings, "I was chucked for coin—or rather for want of it. And I can tell you this, Alan. If a man can take it as you've taken it, it's the finest experience he can go through. Talk about mentatonics; there's nothing in the whole wide world gives a man a finer fillip and sets him on his sea legs, better than having to fight his way back to faith in his kind, till he is able to turn on that tempting devil of cheap cynicism and unfaith and say 'get back!' But that particular devil holds good cards and knows how to play them, too, and for a long time scores most of the points."

"But I have not lost my faith, Hugh. Though if it would make me half as good a fellow as you are, I shouldn't mind. I understand why you've told me this, now; and I think I shall pull through all right. There's a difference in the cards—the motive. If I'd been bowled over for money by such a girl, I admit I would have jibbed. But I know so thoroughly that the motive's all right, that I'll be hanged if I can help feeling in a way that she's probably done the right thing."

"Might be; if there was any chance of making that curious fellow really happy. But there isn't," and Dallas shook his head. "Not a bob's worth of a chance. So that the girl is just throwing away all that she cares about for nothing. Some day, aye, and a soon day too, she'll find that out for herself; and then the ashes may set her teeth on edge with a vengeance."

"What can we do?" asked Alan, somewhat helplessly.

"Nothing, that I can see," was the prompt answer. "Unless you'd like the task of trying to open the old captain's eyes to the truth—which would be about the shortest cut possible to making him miserable and the girl too. No, no," he added sententiously, "the fact is, all these good people have gone a little wrong with the mental perspective. You know what happens when a drop of belladonna is dropped into your eye and the focus all goes wrong, from temporary paralysis. That's the matter here with the mental vision. It'll probably come right after a time—though there may be some awkward complications meanwhile. But you'd best leave things to right themselves."

"They won't right—so far as I'm concerned, Hugh," said Alan despondently. "I suppose I'd best clear out."

"If you want to, yes. If you don't, no. Just let things go on. Saves an awful lot of bother that. Plenty of fresh air, and plenty to do to pan out the time—and you'll do."

"Yes, I daresay; but—well, you see, it knocks a fellow out of time a bit," and Alan smiled rather feebly.

"Don't see that it should in this case; if you're still keen on winning—and she is a girl worth fighting devilish hard for—you've got the best card in the game—the ace of hearts; and if you hold back you ought to win."

"What! in face of this engagement?" cried Alan, so eagerly as to show how strongly he felt.

"'Tisn't the engagement keeps you two apart; it's something a good deal more difficult to tackle than that. The old captain's heart and Miss Margery's niche in it. You'll never marry Margery Allingham unless you find a way to open old John Drury's eyes to the truth without breaking his heart, or unless you hit on a means of cooling or killing the son's passion."

He spoke slowly and with emphasis.

A long pause followed, in which Dallas lighted and half-smoked a fresh cigarette.

"Should I bore you, Hugh, if I told you what passed to-day?" asked Alan, with a smile that suggested a feeling of awkwardness.

"I've been waiting for it," was the reply; and then the other told him the outline of what had happened, and Dallas listened attentively.

"I don't see that it could have been much better under the circumstances," was his comment. "You took the best road, and the other man took the worst. And if you did this when all was against you and in his favor, what mayn't one expect to happen. I wonder what the others say about it all. I'd bet my life that the sister could say a good deal if she pleased."

"What! Nan? Oh, I don't know. She's not the sort of girl to enter much into such a girl as Margery's feelings."

"No? Perhaps not, though I fancy she's a pretty cute young woman," was the reply, and soon after that they went into the house.

Margery remained a long time in her room, Nan being with her, while Mrs. Rudyer spent the afternoon in maneuvering to keep Hugh Dallas in attendance upon herself and away from the others.

Dallas perceived her intention quite plainly, and would have taken means to frustrate it had he not been spared the trouble from a cause which amused as well as interested him. Guy, who thought he was being hardly used, persisted in remaining close to her, and Hugh had no difficulty in understanding pretty much what had happened.

"She's been flirting with the youngster," he said to himself, "and can't shunt him now when she wants to. That's rich. Should like to tell Alan. Serves her right. By Jove! what a difference five years' absence, plus the capacity to keep your eyes open, make in the way you read a woman. How can I ever have—? H'm! She's awfully pretty. No doubt about that. Prettier than ever, so far as that goes. But— Well,

in the old time, I should have wanted to kick that young beggar over the cliff for being a nuisance, and to-day I'm hanged if I shouldn't like to tip him with half-a-sovereign."

He smiled to himself under his mustache, which he was stroking, as he leant back in his garden-chair, thoughtfully watching the two, the others being away.

"Hullo, she's done it at last," he thought, as Guy ran up to the house, laughing, and saying he'd be back in a moment.

"Aren't boys a nuisance, Mr. Dallas?" said Mrs. Rudyer, turning with a laugh to him.

"I like Guy," he replied. "He's a bright, frank, quick lad, and full of good-nature."

"Oh, yes, he's a dear fellow. But boys are—well, they're only boys," with a laugh, "and you can have too much of them."

"Like marmalade, you mean, 'an excellent substitute for butter at breakfast,' but yet not butter, and, if taken in too large quantities, they cloy. They're not men, in fact."

"They're much more useful and agreeable than some men," answered Mrs. Rudyer, a little coquettishly. "I'm sure, I don't know what I *should* have done if it hadn't been for Guy. Everything's so awfully solemn here now since this engagement of Margery's. What a nice-looking man your friend Mr. Ramsay is? and how fortunate that he was with Margery when she hurt her ankle. Poor girl, I'm afraid she was suffering agony. I've never seen any one look so pale and worried before with a mere sprain as she looked when

we found her in that cottage waiting for the carriage which Mr. Ramsay had hurried away so readily to fetch."

She accompanied this with a look which was even more significant than the words.

"Some women are awfully susceptible to pain, and a sprained ankle is always a bad business when you have to walk on it," answered Dallas.

"Yes, indeed. How lucky she was to have Mr. Ramsay's arm to lean on; but dear Margery was always a fortunate girl. Now that you've seen all that you have seen, Hugh—I beg pardon, I mean Mr. Dallas—do you think dear Margery is marrying for love?"

"How can I possibly tell?"

Mrs. Rudyer laughed, and the laugh made her face very pretty.

"No, I suppose not. I suppose that since you turned editor you've learned to shut your eyes and close your ears—instead of using them as in the old times. Have you talked this over with Mr. Ramsay? Is he as indifferent as you are to it all?" she asked, laughing roguishly, and shaking her head at him. "Ah, Mr. Dallas, you can't impose on me in that way, quite. I'm not blind if you are."

"I am," he said. "I'd rather be blind than go bothering into things that don't concern me."

"Thank you," returned Mrs. Ruyder petulantly. "It's very nice to be snubbed in that way. You know I always liked that sort of thing." Then in a different tone, full of regret, "Ah, Hugh, I wouldn't have thought you could change so!"

"Margery wants to know if you can go up to her for a minute or two, Mrs. Rudyer. Can you?"

Both started and turned round to find Nan standing close by them.

"Yes, dear, of course I will," said Mrs. Rudyer, with clever readiness and tact, though fuming inwardly at the interruption. "Excuse me, Mr. Dallas. Are you coming, Nan?"

"In a minute," answered the girl. "I want a breath of air after the sick-room. It always gets to my head," and she sat down in one of the garden chairs.

Hugh Dallas speculated as to whether the girl had overheard Mrs. Rudyer address him by his Christian name, and was more than annoyed that anything of the kind should have occurred. Moreover, there was a spice of the ridiculous in the position which touched him more than anything else.

As soon as Mrs. Rudyer had disappeared into the house, Nan got up from the garden chair.

"I think I should get more air if I were to walk, don't you, Mr. Dallas? Would you like a turn round the grounds?"

"Certainly I should," answered Dallas, surprised, and asking himself what was coming next.

They went some way in silence, and the girl took a path to a secluded part of the grounds.

"Are you a diplomatist, Mr. Dallas?" she asked, looking at him and smiling.

"A diplomatist?" he echoed. Was the girl going to chaff him about what she had overheard?

"Yes. A diplomatist in the sense of being able to help other people to say what they don't know how to

say? I'm an ambassadress, just now. My diplomacy was exhausted when I got Mrs. Rudyer to go indoors and then led you away here so that we should not be interrupted, and I could try and say what I'm sent to say. But I've broken down now."

She blushed and laughed so pleasantly that Dallas was quite struck by her looks.

"The best diplomacy I generally find is to say out plumb and square what's got to be said," he answered.

"I will, then," said the girl. "You know all about Alan and Margery, don't you?"

This was plumb and square indeed, and the question took him by surprise, and he hesitated. She looked at him and smiled.

"I think I can see you do. It'll save me a lot of trouble if you'll just say yes."

"Yes, I think I do." It was his turn to smile.

"Of course. Alan told you. I found it out for myself. I've known it ever so long. I always thought it would end that way as it ought to have ended. And now here's all this trouble. Poor Alan," and she sighed.

"Why only poor Alan?"

"Why not poor Margery as well, you mean? I don't think it's as hard for her as for him. She thinks she's doing right and making everybody except Alan happy—and herself, of course. But Madge never has thought of herself. I do believe she's the most unselfish creature that ever drew breath," she cried enthusiastically. "I'm quite sure in all this she has never thought of herself, it's always been of others.

But Alan can't look at it in that way, of course. He's a man, you see."

"And are men so incapable of appreciating unselfishness?"

He was amused and interested.

"No, I don't mean that, of course. They're not like women in these things. But then Alan doesn't understand things, and one can't, of course, explain them; though I should like to. I can't bear the idea of his thinking ill of Madge; thinking of her as a flirt, when in reality she's just the noblest girl in the world."

"You are a staunch champion, Miss Nan," said Hugh.

"Ah, you don't know Margery, Mr. Dallas, or you wouldn't wonder at anything I may say in her praise."

"Is not Alan to know the reason for this?"

"Am I going to tell *you*, do you mean?" she asked, laughing. "It's not my secret or perhaps I might. It's Margery's. I'm afraid I've already said more than Madge would have let me say if she could have known. But I know I'm safe in speaking to you."

"Thank you," said Dallas. "That is what I should wish you to feel."

"I do feel it, and it is such a relief to have some one to talk to about this. Don't *you* think it's terrible to see such a shipwreck of their happiness?"

"Will the ship be utterly wrecked, and go to pieces beyond hope of recovery?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, speaking slowly and thoughtfully. "Sometimes—but there, I shall let out everything, for I'm just longing to tell you. But I

mustn't yet," she added, glancing swiftly at him. "Perhaps—" she paused.

"When you know more of me, you mean?" he said.

She nodded and laughed.

"Not that I should trust you more than I do. There's no need for that. But—well, I would say that I can't without Margery. You'll think me an extraordinary girl, and I declare I've been chattering all this time and haven't now said what I wanted to say," she added.

"And that is?" he asked.

"Well, we want Alan—I mean, we don't want Alan to—to let anything of what has happened—" she colored and stopped. "I don't know how to put it. It sounded all right when I was with Margery; but I can't say it now."

"Let me say it for you," said Dallas. "You mean, don't you, that the reason for all this sad trouble is one which makes it necessary or very desirable that no one except those who know the secret should suspect its existence; and that it is best for Alan to come here just as usual—if he can, that is—and not let it seem that this engagement has driven him away?"

"Yes," said Nan, "that's it. Do you think—?"

"Oh, yes; Alan is staunch, and will do all in his power to help your sister. We have talked this over, and if you would like to know, he has not a jot or tittle of anger in all his thoughts."

"And will you—?" she stopped again.

"Yes; I'll let him understand in a roundabout way what he is wanted to do. And I'll see that it doesn't come to him from you or your sister."

Nan held out her hand.

"I knew we could trust you," she said, looking into his eyes.

"You may, absolutely," he answered.

Then suddenly a change came over the girl. She started somewhat nervously, and her face crimsoned.

"You won't mention—I mean—I was sorry to interrupt you just now—but—"

Dallas understood her.

"The interruption was welcome, I assure you. I shall not mention it to *any one.*"

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a diplomatist," she said, and laughed—but the laugh was forced, and Dallas judged that the recollection of what she had overheard from Mrs. Rudyer had somewhat embarrassed her; but not knowing what to say he remained silent.

"I must go in. I have been longer, much longer than I meant," said the girl.

They turned, and, after they had gone a short distance, Nan made an excuse and slipped away by a near path leading through one of the kitchen gardens.

Hugh Dallas followed her with his eyes till she disappeared.

"That's a girl in a thousand, and carries a brave little soul. Pretty, too. Lucky fellow the man who wins her. She's as straight as she's staunch; hope the fellow'll be a good sort."

CHAPTER XII.

"Stand by, Don; I'm going about."

"All right."

"Slack off the jib sheets. Mind your heads, you two. What a duffer you are, Nan. Serve you right if you'd lost your hat; and you precious nearly did. *You* ought to know how to be spry when we're going about. Look out now. We're going to have it choppy a bit. And Guy, who was steering the small sailing boat belonging to the Manor House, exchanged a look with Donald Ramsay and laughed. "Now you shall see how the *Flirt* can slip through the water, Mrs. Rudyer. Isn't she a jolly little craft?"

Guy meant mischief, and had planned with Donald to get Mrs. Rudyer out for a sail in the boat in order to "give her a doing," as he expressed it, for her treatment of him.

After Hugh Dallas had been to the Manor House, Mrs. Rudyer had rather dropped Guy, and the latter had resented it strongly. He had been proud of the way in which he had scored with her, and when she had taken to snubbing instead of petting him, he had determined to pay her out.

With this object he had taken Donald into his confidence, and the two lads, knowing the little woman's vanity on the score of dress and personal dignity, had

resolved to get her out in the *Flirt*, and then "take it out" of her.

It was necessary to take Nan partly into their confidence at the last moment; but they only admitted to her their desire to see whether Mrs. Rudyer was really the good sailor she declared she was.

Choosing a morning when the wind seemed likely to freshen with the tide, they induced her to go for a sail, and then, without a word, ran straight out to sea for eight or nine miles before a steady and rising breeze.

Mrs. Rudyer was pleased, and laughed and chatted all the while. She had dressed herself with conspicuous care in a very becoming sailor costume, with a trim little hat, beneath which her golden hair glistened in the sun, while the color in her cheeks made her look more than usually pretty. She flirted with Guy until Donald, who took the helm while they were running out before the breeze, laughed and Nan grew angry.

As the shore grew indistinct, however, Mrs. Rudyer began to feel doubtful, though unwilling to show her uneasiness; and the boy's "revenge" commenced as he noted the anxious looks which she kept casting astern.

Guy was, or pretended to be, too absorbed in her conversation to notice the distance they had sailed, and it was Don who, knowing what a long time it would take to beat back in the teeth of the breeze that was blowing off the shore, suggested that they should turn back.

"Dear me, Mrs. Rudyer," Guy had said, with well-affected surprise. "Just see what you have to answer for. You've been talking to the skipper till he's quite

lost his reckoning. I should think we *must* go about. By Jove, Don, old man, why didn't you wake me up before? It'll take us hours to fetch the moorings against this head wind." Then he looked at the sky as if anxious. "Here, let me take the tiller. I'm afraid we shall have wet jackets before we get back. I hope you're not afraid of a drop of sea-water, Mrs. Rudyer."

"No," she answered, but not very readily; "though I didn't think when we started that it would be rough. But I've nothing on that can be spoilt."

Soon after that they put the boat about, and on the first tack for the shore, the great difference in the amount of the motion made Mrs. Rudyer uncomfortable.

It was not rough, and there was not a particle of danger; but the breeze was fresh, and the *Flirt* danced about considerably.

The little lady's color faded gradually, and Guy, like a boy, noticing this, began to talk about sea-sickness, and tell tales of the many people who had been very ill on various trips of the *Flirt*. It is dispiriting, not to say disgusting, talk when one is comfortably steady on land; but when you are not quite assured of your sea qualities, and are in a cockle-shell of a boat, that is pitching with great vigor in a choppy sea, it becomes worse than nauseating.

Mrs. Rudyer found this out, and soon displayed a very strong tendency to yawn, while her cheeks paled.

"I'm very glad you say you're so good a sailor, Mrs. Rudyer," said her tormentor. "If you weren't, three

or four hours of this might be trying." and his bronzed, ruddy face broke into a pleasant smile.

"Yes, it's fortunate," answered the victim. "Three or four hours, did you say, we shall be?"

Her eyes looked very anxious as she asked this.

"Not more, I think. With any luck at all, we ought to fetch the moorings in that time; don't you think so, Don?"

"Yes, I fancy we might," and Donald grinned. "If you're in a hurry, you might do it in less," and he glanced at Mrs. Rudyer.

"Could we?" she began eagerly, but checked herself. "I really think we ought to be as quick as we can. They'll think we are lost, though it is such a beautiful and enjoyable day."

"Do you feel ill, Mrs. Rudyer?" asked Nan presently.

Nan would never speak to her by her Christian name.

"No, not at all; of course not," was the reply, spoken with enough irritable energy to bring a slight flush to her face.

But it was not the truth, for at that very moment she had been thinking how pleasant it would be to be allowed to lie down in the bottom of the boat, and try to sleep away the time that had to pass before they would reach the land.

"How silent we've all grown," said Mrs. Rudyer, after a long pause, which she found unendurable.

Nan did not want to speak, Don didn't know what to say, and Guy wouldn't talk, being deliberately determined that his victim should suffer in silence.

He knew by experience the bitterness of self-debate

on the weighty issue of to be or not to be—ill ; and he was determined to punish her.

Seeing, however, that his victim was getting rapidly worse, he called to Don, and, putting the boat about, laid her on the other tack, where she was steadier. In this way he gradually reduced Mrs. Rudyer to a condition of abject wretchedness, which even her inordinate desire to keep up appearances was not strong enough to make her seek to disguise.

Then Guy chose a moment for the full consummation of his revenge ; for, boylike, the sufferings of his victim had not the slightest effect upon his compassion or pity. He watched the approach of a large wave, and at the right moment he sent the bow of the *Flirt* right into it. The water struck the boat heavily, rose in a little column of spray, and came hissing right over the *Flirt*, fore and aft, wetting everybody on board from head to foot.

The boys then laughed as they shook off the water. But it was too much for Mrs. Rudyer. It took away for the moment all qualms of sea-sickness, and thus imbued her with some amount of her natural energy. She stamped her foot on the boards, and looked very angrily at Guy as she shook off the water.

"You horrid boy ; you did it on purpose—you know you did. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I call it a most ungentlemanly act." And the vehemence of her reproaches brought the tears into her eyes.

This touched Donald, who couldn't bear to see anybody cry, and whose thirst for revenge, moreover, was only second-hand, and the result of sympathy.

"Stash it, Guy. That was too thick."

Guy grinned provokingly.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said; "but I thought Mrs. Rudyer was much too good a sailor to be afraid of a half a pint of wash. Stand by, Don. We'll go about again, it isn't so rough on the other tack. We'll keep on that till we get under shelter of the land, and then creep up to the moorings in smooth water, and hug the shore. That'll suit you better, won't it?" he asked, turning to Mrs. Rudyer. "You should have told me you couldn't stand even this amount of sea."

There was a suspicion of contempt in his voice and manner; and Nan laughed in a way that irritated Mrs. Rudyer.

"If I'd known you were bringing me out to half-drown me and then laugh at me, I shouldn't have come," she said sharply.

"It's only Guy's fun," said Nan.

"I hate clumsy, practical jokes—especially by boys. I'm wet through," she retorted.

"Sea-water won't hurt you, Mrs. Rudyer," said Donald, in his blunt but well-meant way.

"But I didn't come out to bathe," she answered angrily.

"Well, it's done one good thing," put in Guy. "It stopped you from being sick. You were looking awfully white about the gills just when that wave came aboard."

But the truth of this made the sting of it sharper, and increased her anger, though she said no more.

Very woe-begone and bedraggled she looked when at length they reached the moorings, and rowed ashore in the dingy, and the knowledge of this added to her

vexation enormously when they found the captain and Hugh Dallas waiting for them on the beach.

"What has happened?" asked the captain.

"We shipped a rather big wave, sir," answered Guy, feeling somewhat guilty at this unexpected turn.

"Who had the tiller?" asked Captain Drury.

"I had," answered Guy, reddening slightly.

"You had? Well, I should have thought you would know how to keep such a stiff boat as the *Flirt* dry on such a day. I am very sorry, Mrs. Rudyer."

He said no more for the moment, and Mrs. Rudyer was too busy greeting Hugh Dallas, and too much engrossed by the fear that she was cutting a very sorry figure in his eyes, to push the matter further.

As they all moved away up the beach, however, the captain drew Guy aside, and said:

"Did you do this on purpose, my lad? Because you know how to handle a boat better than to put her nose right into a wave."

"Yes, sir," answered Guy, coloring as he spoke.

"Did you forget that Mrs. Rudyer, as our guest, has a right to be protected against jokes of the kind?"

"I didn't think of that," answered Guy.

"Thoughtfulness is essential to courtesy, Guy, and you are a gentleman. If this trick, or one like it, had been played on Margery or Nan, would you have liked it?"

"No, sir; but they wouldn't have minded."

"What difference does that make in the intention which prompted you? But you are wrong. You have tried to wound the feelings of a guest, and that guest a woman, with thus a double claim on your protection.

I should like you to see how your act would appear in Mrs. Rudyer's eyes. You have done an ungenerous and a discourteous thing, my boy; and that is not like you."

"I am very sorry, uncle. I didn't look at it in that way. I'll go and tell her so, and apologize," said Guy impulsively.

He chanced on an inopportune moment for the apology. Mrs. Rudyer and Hugh were walking alone, Nan having dropped back to Donald, and Mrs. Rudyer did not at all appreciate Guy's interruption, and turned somewhat impatiently when he spoke to her.

"I'm not friends with you," she said playfully, not wishing her real anger against Guy to be seen by Hugh Dallas. "You are a naughty boy, and I don't like you; you played me a trick, I believe."

"It's about that I want to speak to you," said Guy, and then the others came up to them. His face flushed as he continued, "I want to ask your pardon for what I did. I did it intentionally, and I want to ask your pardon. I steered the boat deliberately with the intention of bringing that wave on board. But I am sorry I did it."

"Well, I think we all ought to be angry then, for you served us all alike," said Mrs. Rudyer.

"Yes, but I did it purposely to annoy you; just as I took you so far out to try and make you ill."

He spoke quite frankly and earnestly, and Hugh Dallas felt an inclination to smile, though admiring his candor.

"But you didn't make me ill," said Mrs. Rudyer, hiding her irritation under a simper. "But, never

mind, I'll forgive you, though I won't promise to trust myself in a boat with you again, mind," and she laughed and shook her head.

"Then I sha'n't think you've accepted my apology," said Guy. "You know you've been out lots of times with me alone before, and nothing of the kind has ever happened."

"Very well. We won't say any more about it," said Mrs. Rudyer quickly, feeling very vexed at seeing Dallas turn away, and, as she thought, hide a laugh as he spoke to Nan. "And as for the future, we'll see about it when the chance comes; but I've had enough of the sea for a good time to come."

Then the captain added his voice on behalf of Guy, and they walked up the beach together.

On the path at the top Godfrey and Margery met them, and the incident had to be explained to them.

"You'd better hurry home, Bee, and change your things," said Margery. "There's not much risk, but you mustn't get chilled."

"I wonder you couldn't take better care of the boat, Guy," said Godfrey disagreeably. "You talk enough about being able to sail the *Flirt*. This doesn't look much like it—landing like a parcel of drowned rats."

"Doesn't it?" flashed back Guy, who disliked Godfrey cordially when he was in a sneering mood. "Well, you weren't there, so it doesn't concern you."

"Oh, yes, it does, indirectly. Margery had asked my permission to go with you, but I felt that she wouldn't be very safe under the circumstances, so I said no. I was right, you see. If you half-drown people in this way it won't do."

"Well, I'll sail you any day in the week," retorted Guy.

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about to-day, and about you not having taken proper care; and about my having been right in not letting Margery go with you. Come, Margery, let us go on for our walk. Come."

On hearing the irritable and masterful manner in which he had spoken, Hugh Dallas glanced instinctively at Nan, and saw the girl flush and bite her lips. Then she turned a moment and looked to see if Dallas had noticed what had passed.

Their eyes met, and, reading each other's thoughts, they both looked at Margery.

"Come along, Nan," broke in Mrs. Rudyer. "Let us hurry home and change, and don't let us interrupt the lovers any longer," and she laughed, not pleasantly, and linking her arm in Nan's, led her off quickly in the direction of the Manor House; while Hugh Dallas followed leisurely with the captain.

CHAPTER XIII.

Old John Drury developed a very strong regard for Hugh Dallas, and sought every means of increasing the intimacy between them, from the time when Alan Ramsay first took his friend to the Manor House.

The captain had lived much apart from other men since the bereavement which had so changed the current of his life. He had broken with old friendships and associations and cultivated no new ones to take their place. Among the neighbors he had few acquaintances and no friends among those of his own years ; and it was only when Godfrey and the others had grown out of their teens and had begun to draw round them a few friends that he had cared to throw open the Manor House for much hospitality. He had never shaken off the feeling, with him almost a fear, that something might happen to bring his secret to light, if many people were coming and going to the Manor House, and that in this way Godfrey's life might be made darekr than it was.

Such a man as Hugh Dallas had not thus come within the orbit of his life for many years ; and he was welcome. Dallas appeared in the captain's eyes as a man young in years but yet with the judgment and quick perceptions of experience ; who knew the world and had not been spoilt by it. He had many feelings and sympathies which the captain shared, while the latter

recognized the other's straight-going honesty and sincerity. His qualities of mind formed thus a strong attraction for old John Drury, and his mere superficial gifts of sociability, good humor, tact, and comradeship, cemented the old man's good-will. Moreover, his age and his past history made it improbable if not impossible that he would ever guess anything of the past. Thus Hugh Dallas seemed in a measure to bring a whiff of the world again into the old sailor's life which was both welcome and invigorating. He stayed for more than one week end at the Manor House; and the captain grew to speak more freely to him on many matters, including Godfrey, than to any one else.

"Godfrey's not very well," he said to Dallas, when the others had left them on the day of Mrs. Rudyer's experiences in the *Flirt*.

"No;" Dallas knew that the captain was trying to cover or excuse the cripple's roughness of speech.

"No; he's not what I could wish by a long way. He's always a little irritable when he's not well. Didn't you notice just now how he spoke to Guy?"

"I thought he was glad he had persuaded Miss Allingham not to go out in the *Flirt*."

"Ye—es," answered the captain thoughtfully. "I suppose it was persuasion. But he is apt at times to be—what shall I say—a little stronger than persuasive. Poor lad, he means well I know; but he's not always tactful. I'm afraid I'm to blame a good deal. I've no tact; and then I haven't taken a very sharp line with him. You see—" he stopped, and looked at Dallas as if wanting to be relieved from explaining, and yet wishing his companion to understand him.

"Naturally, you could not deal with him as with other lads," returned Dallas. "But I think it is a pity he cannot more fully realize the great possibilities which lie before a fellow of his powers of mind, altogether apart from other considerations. He suggests to me that kind of mistaken helplessness which would paralyze the commander of a steamship whose engines had broken down, when neither he nor a man of the crew knew how to set a single sail."

The captain smiled, for the figure pleased him.

"Well, he's taking a pilot on board that can teach him," he answered. "Aye, and the best pilot that ever steered a ship through a difficult channel."

"True, most certainly," said Dallas. "I yield to none in my admiration for Miss Allingham. Indeed, if your son knew how much I admire her he might even be jealous."

"Ah, I thank God every day that there was never a thought of love in her mind for another man," said the captain simply. "I have many things to be thankful for—many almost infinite blessings, Mr. Dallas; but there is none of them which I prize so highly as the fact that Margery could give herself heart whole to my boy. It might well have been otherwise. Two young people who have lived in the same house all their lives are often more like brother and sister than lovers. And many girls—not that dear Madge is one of them, bless her; or Nan either, I believe—but many girls look less to the mind than the body, and center their thoughts on that. No one knows so well as I," he continued, after a pause, "what disappointment would have meant to a nature such as Godfrey's. He would have been

like that steamer you spoke of just now, if the sails had gone by the board when the engines broke down—a wreck, soon a derelict."

"I hope they will be happy," said Dallas.

The captain waited before he replied, and when he spoke, it was with a slight and half-suppressed sigh.

"I hope so. Margery should make any man happy; no woman could take with her a more beautiful dowry of blessings. She has been a daughter and companion and caretaker and everything to me," and the thought brought a smile with it.

"Do you think it has put the touch of content into his life that it needs?" asked Dallas.

"That's a shrewd way of yours to put your finger right on the very lever that controls the ship's engines. How can I tell? How can any one tell? Heaven grant it may be so! Certainly it ought to. But Godfrey is—well, Godfrey. He thinks the marriage is all that is needed to make him perfectly happy, but then"—this in a lower and ever more thoughtful tone—"he thought a few weeks back that that happiness would come with the engagement itself. Now he is as anxious for the marriage to be pressed on as he was for the engagement. How would you read that? You are clever at seeing these things."

There was a sense of appeal in the captain's manner, as if he wanted to be strengthened in some view that he had formed, and it touched the younger man closely.

"I should read it with strong hope for the best," said Dallas, embarrassed by his fuller knowledge of the circumstances, and feeling compelled to evade the real point.

"I do," said the captain, adding earnestly, "Heaven grant that I may not be wrong! The marriage, I think, will be soon," and as he said this they reached the Manor House.

The same subject from a different standpoint had been discussed by Godfrey and Margery in their walk. The relations which the engagement had brought about between them were somewhat singular. Margery felt that her promise to marry Godfrey for the reasons that had swayed her required from her a constant subjection to Godfrey's wishes and moods. Her object was his happiness, and through that the captain's; and thus the girl went much farther in the complete sacrifice of herself and her wishes than would have been possible in any other circumstances. She ceased to judge of what she ought to do, and how she ought to be treated by any ordinary tests, and thought only of what was likely to save Godfrey from any sort of pain.

With such a nature as his, this necessitated the almost complete blotting out of self. Towards this she progressed rapidly, however, and thus of all who were present when the *Flirt* came ashore she alone thought nothing of Godfrey's sharpness of manner. She was accustoming herself to look for it.

Yet Godfrey was little if at all happier after the engagement than he had been before it, when once the novelty of the change it wrought had passed off.

"I wonder my father allows Guy to go out alone in the *Flirt*," he said irritably. "He'll drown somebody some day. I sha'n't let you go any more."

"Guy understands how to manage the boat very

well," said Margery. "I have heard uncle say that he could handle her as well as any of the seamen about here; and we know that he's been out in her in all sorts of weather."

"It isn't the first time the pitcher goes to the well but the last that it gets broken. You belong to me now, you know, and I sha'n't let you run any risk." He meant this affectionately.

"I am very fond of the sea," returned Margery.

"Oh, of course, if you like to do those things that you know I don't wish you to, I can't actually lock you up and prevent you. But you won't go with any one except me—that is, if you want to please me." Then with a sudden change, "Don't think me a brute for saying that. It's only my love for you, Margery; and I can't bear to think that even our tastes and wishes are different. I want you to be in perfect harmony with me even in thought. I suppose you can't understand what it is to love like that: to fret, and worry, and grieve if you are away from me, or doing that which is not what I would have chosen for you to do, to feel that in that way some sort of barrier is growing up between us? Ah, love like mine is not all pleasure!"

The girl put her hand in his.

"I will try to do all that you wish, Godfrey," she said.

"Will you?" he exclaimed, stopping and looking up into her eyes. "Will you? Kiss me, Madge."

She bent down and kissed him.

"You know one thing I wish, Madge. Will you do that? Will you let our marriage be as soon as possible?

I long to feel that you will be mine, that nothing can take you away from me, nothing come between us. I want to have you all my own, my very own. I want to have the right to stand between you and all the world and to feel that you belong to me, and that no one can cast even a shadow between us. Will you do this?"

He spoke with passion.

"Who is there to come between us?" asked the girl.

Godfrey cast a quick, suspicious look at her.

"All the possibilities of the world till we stand man and wife before the altar." Then, he added quickly, "If you love me, you will do as I ask."

"It shall be as you will, and when you will," she answered, in a somewhat low tone, thinking to herself that the time could make little difference.

Godfrey, having gained his way, broke out into many protestations of tenderness and love, and spoke of his perfect happiness, thanking her many times for doing what he wished.

In this way the decision was made, and the day fixed; and thus, when Alan Ramsay came over later in the afternoon, the first news he heard was that the marriage was to take place within a month.

The news was disconcerting to others besides Alan Ramsay.

"I *am* astonished, Mr. Dallas," said Mrs. Rudyer. "I declare I can hardly believe it. I've always had an idea that somehow or another the thing would be broken off. Poor dear Margery, she's awfully good, but I can't for the life of me think but it's wrong of her to marry such a comicality as poor Mr. Godfrey. I

never shall think otherwise. I call it a positive sin. She can't love him, can she?"

"I don't know. But marriages do not always depend upon love."

"Oh, you dreadful man, you're always harping on the past. You are really the most vindictive man I ever knew," and she laughed rather boisterously, and hit him playfully with her fan.

"How on earth can I ever have been such a fool as to care for such a woman as this?" was his inward comment upon her action, and he turned from her with a sigh of relief and thankfulness that they were as they were.

As he looked across the room where they were all sitting, his eyes fell on Nan, whom he had noticed to be full of kindly and sympathetic acts of attention to both Alan and Margery during the evening. The sight of her was pleasant to him, especially as a contrast to Mrs. Rudyer. She suggested to him in some way the cool feeling of rested calm which he had now and again experienced when, after a hard day's work in the moiling town, with all the fretful littleness of its strifes, and the wearing worry of its interminable struggle, he had gone away into the country and sought peace and rest in simply gazing on some landscape scene at sunset."

"Am I getting to be a sentimental ass?" he asked himself, with a smile, "or am I so thankful at what I have escaped in one direction that anything looks pleasant by contrast?"

"You seem to have a pleasant thought, Mr. Dallas," said the very sweet, refreshing voice of Nan, who had

approached him while he was thus preoccupied. "Are you smiling at the news of the marriage?"

"No, Miss Nan, I was only laughing at the one person at whom I may laugh with absolute impunity—myself."

"Surely we must be reduced to great straits for a joke before it comes to that," she answered, laughing roguishly.

"I am glad you think I am not to be laughed at easily," he said.

"I did not say that. I only meant that before one will consent to laugh at oneself, there must be a great dearth of humor in other people. To regard oneself, as the only laughable object in a roomful of people takes a lot of moral courage," retorted Nan. "But I did not come to fence. I have been edging my way across the room to ask you what you think of the news." She lowered her voice as she spoke, and went close to his side, speaking very confidentially.

"I have already offered my congratulations," he said lightly.

"That is not fair to speak so to me," said Nan; and Dallas saw she was really agitated. "It has frightened me," she said.

"How frightened you?"

"Don't pretend you don't understand. You know that I and—and Alan, and—I thought, you as well, had been hoping that something would happen to prevent the marriage. And now—" She stopped; and Dallas, looking down at her, thought he could detect signs of tears.

"You think now that nothing can prevent it?"

"Poor Alan!" was all her reply.

"Do you think that anything should prevent it?" he asked.

She looked at him as if indignantly.

"I am not sure," he said, answering her thought, "that any other solution of the tangle is possible, when we remember all whose happiness is at stake. Your sister would not wish it."

The girl at his side made a gesture of impatience.

"Alan is like a brother to me," she said. "I think of him."

"He is also like a brother to me, and I think of him. So that you and I are like brother and sister in this respect."

"I suppose that is why I have spoken so freely to you all through this, and have trusted you so. You would be a good brother," she added, glancing up at him.

"Yes, Mr. Dallas can play the part of any relation to perfection," interposed Mrs. Rudyer, who had approached them unawares, and had overheard the last words. "As a brother, I agree with you, Nan, he would be delightful; and it's such a safe relationship, and so convenient." She laughed somewhat loudly as she finished, while Nan went crimson.

"Convenient, for instance," said Dallas calmly, "in being able to correct the curious mistakes made by those who overhear snap-shots of conversation."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Rudyer. "I understand. But you and I are too old friends to misunderstand one another," and she looked at him with an expression which puzzled Nan, who saw it as she turned away to go to the captain, who called her.

CHAPTER XIV.

After his conversation with Nan on the evening when the date of Margery's marriage was fixed, Hugh Dallas, spurred by the feeling which the girl had shown, had a long talk with Alan Ramsay on the subject. But it led to nothing.

"I would give half I am worth to stop the marriage —all, if I did not think Margery and I would want more to live upon than I could ever earn," said Alan; "but I shall be loyal to the promise I gave and make no attempt to interfere. There's no way out of it—no way that Margery would consent to adopt. You see that."

"I can't see very far in the matter," answered Dallas. "But certainly it seems that she holds her duty to the captain to be paramount; and the duty means sacrificing herself and you for the happiness of him and Godfrey. There's one way to stop it."

"What's that?" and the eagerness of the tone showed Dallas how much Alan felt.

"By letting the captain know the truth. I know what the effect would be on him."

"Likely enough. But who would tell him? Would you? I wouldn't—if for no other reason than because Margery would hate me for making him miserable. Nan wouldn't. Nobody else knows."

"Somebody else guesses."

"Eh? oh, you mean Margery's chatty little friend, Mrs. Rudyer," said Alan, laughing. "Maybe, but she's not exactly the kind of diplomatist to solve this riddle. By Jove, it's awfully rough on a fellow to have had a fall at the very last fence. And I think it's worse to know of a means which ought to let you win, and yet not be able to use it."

"Shall you stay for the—till it's over?" asked Dallas, changing his phrase.

"I don't know. I feel sometimes that I could just go and hang myself; and then the next minute I'm full of praise for what Margery's doing. And if I suffer, great Heaven, what must she feel? That's what makes me feel what a whining, cowardly lout I am. But, to tell the truth, I never thought it would come to this. Like an innocent man convicted for murder, I suppose I've gone on thinking it can't be true; and that Margery can't be punished for what she hasn't done. And yet I'm such a helpless ass. Here, I declare I'd give my life for the girl, and all I can do is whine at myself for a coward. I hate myself when I think of it."

There was, however, nothing to be done; and Dallas went back to Middlingham full of regret. He was unable to suggest any remedy, although Alan Ramsay's expression of helplessness had appealed to him more powerfully than anything else that had been said.

Here was a girl bent upon a sacrifice of her own and his best friend's happiness out of a feeling of pure chivalry, and in what he felt to be the perfectly illusory

hope of making two other people happy—and yet his wits could find no way through the problem.

"I'm sure it would be wiser for the captain to know the truth; but, then, who's to tell him? Every soul about the Manor House believes it would break his heart by disappointing that selfish beggar of a son. Yet more certainly will it break his heart if he ever learns what he has done in forcing Margery and Alan apart, while that fellow's passion will burn itself out like a naphtha sponge—and then nobody's happiness will be gained. But if I were to hint at the truth he wouldn't believe me, and I'd take my oath that Miss Margery would find some means to lull his suspicions to sleep again. There's no cunning so keen as a woman's when love is the motive, and doing what she believes to be right is the object."

In this way he talked with himself half-a-dozen times a day, coming to no conclusion, except that things must go on, and, as he put it, Margery must just burn on the suttee pyre she was determined to light.

On the third day after he had returned from Seacove a surprise awaited him at his office.

Among his letters was one unsigned, addressed to him by name:

Private and Confidential.

Hugh Dallas, Esq.,
Editor of the *Evening News*,
Broadgate,
Middlingham.

The letter ran as follows:

"Honored Sir,—This is an appeal to you as a pub-

lic man to prevent a crime being committed which you know of. If a marriage you know of takes place at Seacove which has just been fixed, it will be a crime, and you ought to stop it. You'll know who is meant, and you'll be responsible if you don't step in and stop it.

"If you want a sign that this is right just you ask G. D. who Esther Southerst is. You'll soon see I am right. This is not to be put in your paper, but it's an appeal to you as a public man who knows the circumstances to do your duty and prevent a crime.—Yours truly, "One Who Knows."

Dallas read the letter quickly through and laid it down with a smile; but picked it up again almost directly, and read it again more thoughtfully.

"That's an oddity; wonder if it means anything. Won't destroy it," he thought; and he laid it by on his desk, while he went on with the morning's work.

He had a busy task of it to get through the work in the time. His was a paper of many editions, the earliest of which was published about one o'clock, to get away to towns and districts at a considerable distance; and he thus kept both his shorthand writer and himself going at full pressure during the hours in which the work had to be done.

By mid-day the work was over, and his first slack moment he gave to the letter. He read it a third time.

"Is it worth doing anything with?" he asked himself; "or is it only a hoax? Writing looks disguised. Best place for anonymous letters is the waste-paper basket. But if it isn't a hoax—and the marriage at

Seacove is the only marriage that it can be—then G. D. means Godfrey Drury. That's as plain as an inkpot. A notice to correspondents can do no harm, and it might draw something. Let's see."

He drafted one rapidly.

"'One who knows' (Blackeaton).—You must send some further particulars if you want anything done."

"That'll do it. Yet, dash it, I'm not a detective. Never mind; can't do any harm, and— What is it?"

This to a lad who came in.

"Private telegram, sir."

"Well, hang it, this is queer," he exclaimed, as he read the telegram. "By Jove, that notice shall certainly go in now, on spec."

He took the notice he had drafted, and carried it himself to the composing-room.

"Get this notice in, Mr. Adams," he said to the overseer. "It is very particular."

Then he stopped and made a few inquiries about certain office matters, gave some directions as to the paper, and returned to his room, pulled out the telegram and read it again.

"To Dallas, Editor, *Evening News*, Middlingham. Shall arrive Middlingham three this afternoon to see you about important private communication affecting you.—Godfrey Drury, Seacove."

"I suppose my correspondent has given him a shake up as well," was his immediate conclusion, with one of those shrewd guesses he so often made. "Must be that. No other communication affecting me could possibly bring him over here in such a hurry. How the dickens can they have brought me into it? Ah,

well, I shall know all about it when G. D., as they call him, gets here."

He put the letter and telegram into his pocket, and forced his attention upon some other matters, until he went away to dinner. He thought over it all again as he walked to his rooms, and again during his dinner, and afterwards when he went for a short walk before he returned to the office.

"Crime! that's Mr. G. D.—if it isn't a lie; certainly can't be Miss Margery. Esther Southerst—of course there's a woman in it; equally, of course, there's a natural deduction one might draw which would put G. D. and Esther Southerst in brackets. But surely that fellow can't—" He finished the thought with a smile. "Psh! can't be. It's a hoax. But whose? Has that most amiable little mischief-maker a finger in this pie?" and the picture of Mrs. Rudyer rose before him. "No," he said, after a minute, with a shake of the head; "she'd have tackled either Alan or the Captain. It's a bit of a puzzle. Glad I put that notice in; hope it will draw something."

He mused about it in this way, and when he went to the office he gave directions that when Godfrey called he should be shown in at once to him.

A few minutes after three Godfrey arrived, and a glance into his face showed Dallas that something was very much amiss. The cripple looked pale and worried, and his eyes had an expression of suppressed excitement or anger, while his features were haggard. He greeted Dallas very briefly, and yet with a very friendly manner.

"I had your wire, of course," said Dallas, not

appearing to observe the other's perturbation and excitement.

"Yes, I wired you at once. I didn't want to miss you. You are keen enough to see that I am upset, and that the matter is one of deep importance. Otherwise, I shouldn't have wired. I hope I have not kept you in."

"My dear Mr. Godfrey, don't say a word of that. I have had too much kindness at the Manor House for you not to feel at perfect liberty to let me be of use to you, if I can." He spoke very kindly. "You are right," he added, "I *can* see that something has upset you. Do you wish to tell me about it?"

"First I must ask for your implicit confidence."

"It is yours—without asking."

"Then I shall want to ask you one or two painful questions, and should like you to answer them," said Godfrey, hesitating a little.

"To the best of my power you may rely on me," answered Dallas, wondering what was coming next.

"I have had this letter this morning. Will you read it?" And he handed Dallas a letter enclosed in an envelope.

In a moment Dallas recognized the handwriting as being identical with that of the letter in his pocket, and the post-mark was the same—Blackeaton.

He was now thoroughly on his guard, however, and as Godfrey's eyes were fixed eagerly upon him, watching every sign or movement of his features, he did not let a trace of his thoughts or feelings show. He sat turning the letter over once or twice before taking it out of the envelope, as if examining the writing and

post-mark, but in reality schooling himself to show no surprise whatever at what the contents might be.

It was well that he had taken this precaution.

The letter was as follows :—

"Honored Sir,—It is right that you should know the truth even though it may be painful to you. You are being made a fool of. You think you are about to marry a girl who loves you. You are a fool for your pains. She loves another man, and Mr. Dallas, who lives at Middlingham, and has been on visits to the Manor House, can tell you all about it if he likes. If you want to know why Miss A. is going to marry you, I can tell you—it's out of pity for your being a cripple. This is all as true as gospel.—Yours truly,

"A. B. C."

Despite his resolve not to be surprised at anything he might read, Dallas could scarcely refrain from a start of astonishment at reading his own name, and seeing the part assigned to him by the writer.

He read it through a second time—not that he did not quite grasp its contents on the first reading, but that he might have time to think what line he had better take. The letter put him in a very tight place indeed.

"That is a very extraordinary production," he said, laying down the letter, "and I am glad you have brought it straight to me. We in newspaper offices know what sort of value to attach to anonymous letters. We are constantly receiving them." He said this with a smile and in an easy voice, as if the matter were only of the most trivial importance.

"Yes, but is it true?" burst from Godfrey, his voice hoarse and his eyes alight with excitement and emotion.

"I rarely notice such letters in any way, and as for allowing such a thing to cause me even a moment's uneasiness, I should not dream of it."

"That may be," replied the other man, speaking quickly and eagerly; "but I am not schooled to that pitch of indifference. This is a matter of life and death to me. I declare to heaven I would rather die than find it to be true. You are a friend, Mr. Dallas. You know something of what this must be. Tell me, for God's sake tell me, what does it mean?"

Godfrey spoke with rising vehemence and agitation, and getting up from his chair he began to pace quickly up and down the room.

"It means," said Dallas, "it can mean only one thing. There is some cowardly wretch who has some sort of low spite against you or against Miss Allingham, and chooses this mean and despicable way of trying to injure your happiness." He placed his hand on the letter as he spoke.

"You mean that there is no truth in it—no truth so far as you know?" said Godfrey, coming to him and laying his hand on his arm, and gazing up wistfully and searchingly into his face. "For God's sake, tell me."

"Nay, for me even to presume to answer such a slander would be an act of disloyalty to Miss Allingham, which you yourself would be the first to recognize when you are cool enough to see how unworthy of her is the suspicion which underlies such a question," answered Dallas diplomatically.

The cripple stood looking eagerly into the other's face for fully half a minute without replying, and Dallas met the look without flinching.

"Are you telling me the truth, or deceiving me?" The words seemed to force themselves out despite the effort at self-restraint.

"Mr. Drury!" exclaimed Dallas, raising his eyebrows slightly, and speaking in a tone of surprised remonstrance.

"Forgive me, forgive me," cried Godfrey, recommencing his walk. "But I am beside myself. You can't imagine what this means to me. By Heavens, it drives me mad to think of it. Will you tell me that all this is a lie—a damnable, slandering lie—meant for nothing but to stretch me on the rack and ruin my happiness with the curse of doubt?"

"I can tell you," answered Dallas, speaking in a very earnest tone, "that all that I know or have seen of Miss Allingham has filled me with implicit and unshakable faith in her singleness of purpose and absolute sincerity and truth. I have never in my life met with any one who filled me with a more complete sense of absolute confidence. Take my advice. School yourself to look at this slander as I look at it—a lie to which some coward dare not put his name for fear of that punishment he would deserve and receive. Nay more. Ask yourself of your own knowledge what sort of reception a slander like this merits." Then thinking it was time he commenced attacking instead of defending, he said quietly: "There are two ways to treat things of this kind"—with a contemptuous wave of the hand toward the letter. "One is to take

no notice whatever; and that is the wisest though not always the most easy. The other is to go straight to headquarters."

"I have come straight to you," said Godfrey.

"Yes; but headquarters here would mean Miss Allingham herself," answered Dallas deliberately.

"I couldn't do that," cried Godfrey, shrinking together at the idea.

At that moment the bell of the telephone in the room rang, and Dallas excused himself and went to the instrument.

While he was there, waiting during a gap in the conversation, a thought occurred to him.

"If the writer had gone so near the truth about Margery being in love with Alan Ramsay, might there not be some foundation for the other suggestion?" he thought. Then the sentence in the letter recurred to his mind, "Ask G. D. who Esther Southerst is?"

The telephone suggested how he could observe whether the mention of the name had any effect upon his visitor.

He waited until the man who had rung him up had finished the conversation, and then commenced to take down an imaginary communication from some one.

"Excuse me one minute, Mr. Godfrey, will you?" he said, turning to the other; "but a correspondent is sending me a piece of news which I must write out." Then turning back to the telephone, he called: "Go on. Are you there? Hallo, hallo! Are you there? Yes; *Evening News*. Dallas. Right. Go on. 'This afternoon, in Smalley Bridge.' Yes." ("We always repeat in order to prevent mistakes, you know," he

said, in an aside to Godfrey, turning so that he could watch the latter closely.) "Yes, yes. Go on. 'A bad accident occurred in—' Where? What place? Do speak plainly. Don't get so near the telephone. Where? Porker what? Oh! Barker Crescent. 'A heavy wagon'—*do* go on—'upset. A what? A tram? A tram later—I can't hear what you say—oh, a perambulator; in charge of a woman. What's that? Two children hurt—Ann Padley—spell it—oh, one badly. Woman's name. What? S. what? Her? Her what? Spell it. Oh, Esther Southerst! Esther Southerst! Well, why can't you speak plainly? Oh! S. S. Hurst. Is that all? Well, you shouldn't have bothered me with it. You'd better repeat it to the sub-editor. All right. Good-bye."

There was no need for more. What Dallas had seen when he mentioned the name showed him clearly enough that the writer of the letter had made no mistake.

"People are so foolish," said Dallas, as he sat down again. "They think that one has nothing to do but take some trumpery paragraph over the wires. But what is the matter? Aren't you well, Mr. Godfrey?"

He might well ask, for the other man was leaning back in his chair, white and agitated.

CHAPTER XV.

"I'm rather subject to these moments of—of weakness," said Godfrey Drury, smiling very faintly, and making a great effort to regain self-possession. "I have been very much upset, very much by this matter."

"I can see that, and I can understand it," answered Dallas.

But the other's manner was completely changed. All the fire and energy seemed to have exhausted itself suddenly, and he appeared now more like a man who was much more depressed and dejected than angry. He was apologetic, and looked abjectly miserable.

"I may take it from you, then, Mr. Dallas, may I, that so far as you know all this is untrue?"

"I have already spoken as strongly as I could speak," replied Dallas. "And if you take my advice, you will put the whole matter out of your thoughts."

Godfrey answered this with a look which showed hopelessness of his doing anything of the kind.

"I will try," he said, and then rose to leave.

"You are not going?" asked Dallas. "Won't you come up to my rooms?"

"My train goes at 5.15, and it is now more than half-past four."

"My rooms are near the station. There will be

time for some tea, at any rate ; and you have fasted a long time, I expect."

"Yes, I shall be glad of something. But I can never eat when I am much disturbed in mind."

They went out together, and Dallas endeavored to persuade his companion to stay long enough to take some dinner with him at an hotel ; but Godfrey pleaded that the others did not know of his absence, and that he had made no arrangements—in short, that he was anxious to hurry back.

During the short interval before the starting of the train, Godfrey was very silent. He answered such questions as Dallas put to him in monosyllables, and seemed unable to force his thoughts to keep up even a semblance of interest in the matters spoken of. It was evident to Dallas that he was brooding over one of two things, either the thoughts and suspicions which the letter had caused, or the associations which the unexpected mention of the name of Esther Southerst had aroused.

"Probably a little of both," was Dallas's comment. "Wish I'd spared the poor beggar the mention of the name. That's the worst of not knowing the strength of a charge before you fire the gun."

To Godfrey he spoke very kindly and earnestly before they left the house to go to the station.

"I am glad you came to me, Mr. Drury ; I wish very much that you should look on me as a friend in all this. If I can help you in any way, by talking things over, in itself a great relief at times ; by trying to form an opinion as adviser ; by making any kind of inquiries for you ; by doing anything in my power,

I hope you will let me. Newspaper men are supposed to be level-headed, you know, and sometimes we have a knack of hitting on things that people who move more in grooves might miss. A confidential friend, even if not a very wise one, is sometimes useful and sometimes even comforting. And it is clear there is some one who has some sort of a grudge against you."

Godfrey sat for a minute in silence.

"Will you come to the Manor House on Saturday?" he asked. "My dear father is always glad to welcome you, and perhaps by that time I may have thought over this thing."

Dallas agreed to go, and then walked with him to the station and saw him off.

"It's a curious business, and I'm not sure that my part isn't the most curious of all. Here am I asking the fellow to trust to me to help him to get rid of doubts which stand between him and his marriage to a girl whom I would ten thousand times rather see married to old Alan. Yet I was absolutely sincere in my offer. How was that?" then after a pause of introspection, he added, "I suppose it's because I believe that the truth will mean the parting and not the marrying of these two. But I don't see it yet."

There was no response to the notice in the paper during the rest of the week, and it was thus uncertain whether it had been seen by the correspondent.

Reflection strengthened Dallas's opinion that there was a good deal in the background which might very materially affect the position of matters at Seacove. During the week he had to consider what line he should

take in regard to the very peculiar position in which he stood to the various parties; and at first it caused him no little amused perplexity.

He resolved in the result that he would say nothing to any one of the anonymous letter which had been addressed to himself. If he told Alan it would only create some confusion; while if he gave a hint to Margery through Nan he thought it might only increase her embarrassment. He had been trusted, as it were, with the confidence of all three sides, and he could best observe the confidence, he argued, by maintaining silence until anything should happen which might make it necessary to speak.

More than once he had tried to think out some solution of the riddle about Esther Southerst. Who she was, what was her connection with the Manor House, why Godfrey should have been so moved by the mere mention of her name—these and other questions clustered round the subject. But obviously he could do nothing but guess, in the absence of any further information, and thus he tried to put the matter aside until he could find out the facts.

For this reason, among others, he was glad to go to the Manor House. Nan, he thought, would be able to tell him how matters were shaping; and he reflected that it was very fortunate that he had an ally, and such an ally, in the house.

He walked from the station, leaving his bag to be sent after him, and taking the privilege of a friend of the house, he crossed the park and entered the grounds by a private gate. As soon as he had passed through a part of the shrubbery and crossed the rosery he came

in sight of the gabled end of the house—a view that was exceedingly beautiful—and he looked about him. Then he stopped, but not to admire the old house nor the ivy-clustered gable end.

In a hammock, which was swung between two forked branches of a large lower bough of the huge cedar tree which stood in the center of the biggest lawn, lay Nan. She was dressed in a creamy white gown, relieved with one or two pale blue ribbons, which fluttered idly in the soft, warm summer breeze.

Dallas was quite surprised to find what a pretty picture she made. The white, graceful figure in the shade was brought into contrast with the deep dark green of the old cedar foliage, while a glint of sunlight straying now and again through the heavy limbed old tree printed little spots of gold on the white dress, or the dark hair, or the comely chiseled features.

"It's a good thing for my peace of mind that I'm just on thirty, and old enough and soured enough to take a brotherly interest in her. She *is* pretty; I'm astonished. I hope she'll get a—she'll be lucky, I mean. I'm glad there isn't another unfortunate Godfrey to step in and demand her young life as well as her sister's. If I—but what's the good of fooling in this way? She's just a nice little body, and if she marries well and settles down anywhere within reach she'll— Hugh, you're a fool."

At that moment one of the little sunrays got between Nan and her book, and flashed into her dark eyes, making her start and look up.

She saw Dallas standing and looking at her, and her cheeks flushed crimson. She got out of the hammock

as only graceful girls can get out, and went to him, her eyes shining with pleasure.

"Have you been watching me long? I knew you were coming—Godfrey said so—and I was so pleased. I am so glad to see you."

"It is very pleasant to me to be welcomed like this," he said, smiling as they shook hands. "You can hardly understand what a keen edge of pleasure it puts on life to come to such a house."

"It's a gloomy enough house now," answered the girl, "and I hope you will brighten us all up a little. We need it. But are you not going to stay?" she asked, looking for his luggage.

"Until Monday morning, I hope. I left my bag to be brought up from the station."

"Good," said Nan, with such emphasis that Dallas could not but be pleased.

"She is very courteous," he thought. And what has made you all gloomy?" he asked.

"That's just what I'm dying to ask you," she said. "You know we are fellow conspirators and allies. I want to ask you what happened on Wednesday? Godfrey was awfully upset at breakfast—I thought he was going to have a fit. He was in a great rage, and looked daggers at every one. Then he went off on some mysterious journey—I suppose to you at Middlingham, because after he came back he said you were coming over to-day. And he has been so awfully depressed and miserable ever since that poor Madge has been wretched. And now, please, what is it? I have been dying to ask that question."

"That is why you were so glad for me to come?"

asked Dallas, feeling a little disappointed—though quite unreasonably as he told himself.

The girl shot a glance at him which was quite grave and reproachful; but brightened immediately as she smiled and replied:

"Is not that enough?" and she blushed a little as their eyes met.

"But what if I have no answer to give to your question?" he said.

"Ah, but you have. I could read plainly enough that Godfrey had seen you. Besides, I can see you are keeping watch over something now which you could tell if you would. You mustn't have secrets from your ally. Remember your words."

"You are right, Mr. Drury did come to me," said Dallas.

"Well?" and she looked inquiringly into his face.

"And he saw me at Middlingham."

"Yes?" still looking at him.

"And we had a conversation."

"Which you don't think you ought to tell me," finished Nan very quietly. "All right. Then we are not to be allies?"

"As firm as ever, I hope. But Mr. Drury came to speak about a matter in confidence, and I think that even my ally will see that I am bound to respect that confidence."

"Your ally doesn't like it; but she sees no way out of it. Can't you give me just a tiny, little, weeny bit of a hint? I know it's serious, because Godfrey has carried that fact in his face ever since. And I know that it has something to do with Margery, because his

manner has been so extraordinary with her—sometimes almost violent, sometimes as if he couldn't make enough of her. You see I tell you all *I* know."

"I have told you exactly how it stands with me," he replied.

"But I can't understand what it has to do with you," said Nan, her forehead puckering in perplexity. "I've been thinking about that ever since. I suppose you can't tell me that, either, can you?" she asked, looking at him. Then quickly, before he had time to reply, "No, no, don't say it. I can see you're only going to say no. I suppose you can't help it; but I don't think it's a bit nice of you."

"Not quarreling, I hope. That would be so very sad," said the sweet, soft tones of Mrs. Rudyer, who had come up unobserved to where they were standing in the shade of the large cedar tree. "You two are always such *good* friends that really it would be distressing for you to fall out."

"No, we're not quarreling," answered Nan shortly, while Mrs. Rudyer and Hugh Dallas shook hands.

"I'm delighted at that. I quite thought dear Nan was scolding you; and I positively wondered what it could possibly be about, till I thought she must have been taking you to task for coming into the grounds by a back path and interrupting her when she was quite alone, and keeping her from letting us know that you had arrived. Was that what you were saying was not a bit nice of him? You must look out for him, Nan. He's a man to beware of, I can tell you; and I know him."

"Indeed," answered Nan calmly. "I certainly was

not taking Mr. Dallas to task, as you call it, at all. I'm confident that uncle would be glad to see him even if he came in a balloon and chose to slide down the chimney."

"Oh, Nan, Nan, you are a dreadful girl. What would poor young Momerie say?"

Nan flushed either with anger or confusion; and her eyes looked dangerous for a moment.

"I will tell uncle that you have come, Mr. Dallas," said Nan, turning away to the house.

"But don't say he has been here half an hour, dear, or the captain might not be pleased at your having monopolized him—you know how he likes to welcome Mr. Dallas."

Nan took no notice of this, but walked on to the house, and Hugh, feeling very angry with Mrs. Rudyer, was going to follow, when the latter stopped him by saying:

"Why do you flirt with that girl in such a barefaced manner? If you have no thought of what others may say, at least I think you might wait until I have left the place."

Hugh looked at her, masking his astonishment and irritation under an amused and somewhat cynical smile.

"I beg your pardon? I don't understand you."

"Nonsense. You understand me perfectly; and you needn't stand staring at me with that stage-struck smile. You know perfectly well that I am only staying in this place so that I may see you occasionally, and the least you might do is to avoid flirting right before my eyes, even if it is only done to pique and annoy

me. You know it must make me angry. Please, promise me not to do it, Hugh," she said in a coaxing tone, raising her eyes with a beseeching gesture to his face, and putting out her hand and touching his arm. "It makes me so miserable."

"You must not call me by my Christian name. I do not wish it," he said.

"But you are always Hugh in my thoughts," she said softly. "Won't you promise me not to flirt in this way with Nan?"

"Knowingly I have never flirted in my life," he said somewhat sternly, as the suggestion both pained and annoyed him.

"That makes it all the more striking now," she replied readily.

The man laughed.

"This is too ridiculous," he said. "Though whether to laugh you out of your present absurd mood, or to fly into a passion with you, I don't know. It seems too absurd to get angry, but really it would make it more easy to explain matters. I don't want to say anything that seems harsh; but you must please remember that you are Mrs. Rudyer, and that the circle of the life which you deliberately chose five years ago revolves where the smaller circle of mine can never overlap it. The choice you made then was made for life—and is irrevocable."

"You loved me then," she said slowly. She had turned very white, and was trembling.

"The past is past, absolutely," he said firmly.

She glanced up and caught his eyes bent upon her with a look so decisive and cold that she shivered.

"Don't look like that at me," she cried eagerly, putting both her hands on his arm, and gazing into his face. "I can't tell you all I think sometimes; but, Hugh, for the love of Heaven try not to think so hardly of me, for the sake of old times. I can't tell you what I feel—of course I can't"—she was growing hysterical, "but I swear to you I have repented."

"Mrs. Rudyer," cried Hugh, drawing back.

She moved her hands once or twice aimlessly in front of her, and then, covering her face with them, sank down, sobbing hysterically, on a garden chair.

Hugh was touched at the sight of her distress, but all his feelings melted into irritation, not unmixed with confusion, when he caught a glimpse of Nan's white dress turning away from one of the upper windows of the house, and directly afterwards saw a short, elderly, stout man standing by the side of the house and staring at him and the weeping woman beside him with astonishment and wonder on his florid face. Dallas guessed intuitively that it was Mr. Rudyer, and the thought added much to his annoyance.

CHAPTER XVI.

Before Hugh Dallas had recovered from the feeling of irritation at the false position into which Mrs. Rudyer's inconvenient and ill-timed impulse had placed him, Captain Drury had joined that lady's husband, and came hurrying forward to meet and welcome the visitor.

An introduction of the two men to one another followed, and Dallas was conscious that Mr. Rudyer scanned him very closely and curiously, and spoke a little stiffly. But the incident passed away as Godfrey came out from the house, followed soon after by Margery, and then Mrs. Rudyer took an opportunity of slipping away.

He was not long before he detected symptoms of the gloom of which Nan had spoken, and he was concerned to see on the faces of the captain and Margery signs of real trouble.

Godfrey, contrary to his usual habit, kept close to Dallas's side while they were all standing together, and at the earliest moment tried to get him away to speak to him privately.

"I have thought over everything that you said to me, Mr. Dallas," he said, "and I really think you are right. I have been trying to put the whole matter away from me, and not to think about it at all. But

perhaps you can hardly tell what a struggle it means for me. I am not like other men, I fancy."

He said this very sadly, and Dallas had never heard such an expression from him before.

"It is your wisest and your only course, under the circumstances," he replied. "But why should you think you are not like other men? Do you suppose that other men would not be affected by such a disagreeable incident as this?"

"They would be affected, perhaps, but—well, not as it affects me."

"Pardon me, if I say that I think I know what you mean," said Dallas kindly; "but I think you are quite wrong. We are all alike when our heart is scarred, or even menaced with the iron. You may perhaps have a capacity for deeper feeling, and thus have more pain, but even that I question."

Godfrey's face had flushed at the other's words, and he did not reply immediately.

"Well, I am trying to follow your advice," he said. "You have not told any one of this? They know, of course, that I was with you on Wednesday."

"Certainly, I have told no one."

"Do you think I should take any steps to trace the writer of the letter?"

"Have you any idea from whom it can have come?"

"No. No definite idea. Of course, one can have suspicions."

"What could you do by making inquiries, except to prolong your sense of disquiet?"

"That is just what I have asked myself," replied Godfrey.

"You know of no one who has a grudge against you of any kind?" asked Dallas.

"We are not a family to generate such feelings," replied Godfrey, after a moment's hesitation.

"Exactly," said Dallas, noticing the evasion and the hesitancy. "Then I should rub the whole matter off the slate." And with that they went into the house.

In the drawing-room, just before dinner, Margery found an opportunity of speaking to Dallas.

"Godfrey has been to see you, Mr. Dallas!" she began.

"Yes; he came on Wednesday. He had never seen the inside of a newspaper office before, I think."

"Nan tells me the business he came on was private," said the girl, looking at him out of her calm gray eyes. "Does that mean that it is private from me?"

"He came to talk a matter over with me, and I promised that, so far as I was concerned, I would not mention it to any one. You know that editors are supposed to be entrusted with matters which touch even the welfare of empires."

"Yes," said the girl pleasantly, "you are very clever at starting false trails. But was it anything that concerned us, or any of us here at the Manor House; or was it merely an ordinary matter of business?"

"Would it surprise you very much to hear that he had been over to get a few wrinkles about how to get into print?"

Margery looked gravely and earnestly at him, and then very slowly her lips parted with a smile, and she shook her head.

"I won't bother you any more ; but don't try to set up a wrong sign-post. I read that sign as 'no thoroughfare.' Am I right?"

"Yes ; I am afraid so."

"Well, I'll try another road. Will you wait here a minute for me?"

She ran off, and returned almost directly with Godfrey.

"Phew ! Now for some by-play," said Dallas to himself.

The girl linked her arm in Godfrey's to prevent his leaving, and then opened fire at once.

"I'm the grand inquisitor," she said, "and you two have been detected in the very act of conspiracy, and I have to question you."

The two men exchanged a rapid glance.

"No, no ; it's no use trying to signal to one another. Grand inquisitors didn't stand that kind of thing in Spain, and they won't put up with it in Seacove. The charge against you rests at present on suspicion, and suspicion which your own acts have served to create. You, Godfrey, on Wednesday, went from home to Middlingham, to meet and consult with you, Mr. Dallas. You did consult or conspire together, and, as part of the arrangement or plot, you agreed to meet here today. As soon as you met you resumed your secret consultation, and were seen to be in close conference. More than that, the emissaries of the inquisition have questioned you and have come to the clear conclusion that there is a secret understanding between you which affects the repute and well-being of some of us at Seacove—you needn't exchange looks again—and

now you are to say what it all means," and Margery looked from one to the other.

Hugh Dallas would have been amused at the awkwardness of the situation had it not been for the exceedingly grave look which clouded Godfrey's face.

"I have already asked the inquisitor whether it would be a matter of much surprise if the guilt were connected with authorship and publication," said Dallas.

"You have," answered Margery dryly, "and I think the inquisitor made it pretty plain that she had no intention of being hocussed by any such suggestion."

"Yet that is just what it is," said Godfrey, with emphasis. "I went to see Mr. Dallas on a matter of authorship."

Margery looked incredulous.

"Authorship of what?" she asked.

"The authorship of a story," said Godfrey, so readily that Dallas was surprised. Godfrey himself relaxed something of his gloomy look at the play on the word.

"What story?" asked the girl, looking from one to the other.

"Ah, now you are asking more than we ought to tell, I think," said Dallas, seeing that Godfrey hesitated.

"Who is the author?"

"That is just the very crux of the question," replied Dallas.

"Do you mean me to think that Godfrey left here in the mood he was in on Wednesday, and returned in

the mood he did, merely on account of a question of the disputed authorship of some work of fiction?"

"You have put the case as I might have put it," answered Dallas.

"Then there is some play on the word 'story' or 'work of fiction'?"

"Don't ask any more questions, Margery," broke in Godfrey bluntly, and, as it seemed to Dallas, with agitation. "It is a matter in which you can have no concern, and that must suffice."

The girl sighed.

"I am sorry if I have annoyed you by saying what I have, Godfrey. I wish you could have told me. It was not mere curiosity that made me ask; I thought it might have been of use. But if you do not wish me to know, I'll say no more."

"I would rather you did not know just at present," returned Godfrey, less ungraciously. "You shall know some day that there has been nothing worth asking about. And when I publish my book, and get a great review of it in *Middlingham Evening News* to lift it into fame, you'll see how wise I was in going to consult Mr. Dallas."

"Yes, I know he is a friend," said Margery simply, but in such a tone that it warmed the latter's heart to hear it.

Some of the others came in then, and the "court of inquisition" stood adjourned *sine die*.

At dinner Dallas began to realize something of the effect of the scene with Mrs. Rudyer. She appeared to be somewhat nervous and uneasy; she blushed a good deal, and talked much with the captain, at whose

right hand she was sitting. But Dallas knew her well enough to be able to tell that her excitement was as much the result of nervousness as was the over-studied politeness with which once or twice she spoke to him.

He knew also that there were others at the table who read her conduct much in the same way. More than once he caught Nan's eyes fixed upon her with a calm, critical scrutiny, and the slight lifting of the eyebrows and barely perceptible drawing down of the corners of the girl's sensitive mouth enabled him to read her verdict. He was amused by this at first ; but his amusement was cut prematurely short by his suddenly finding her eyes, with the same dispassionate, searching scrutiny, turned from Mrs. Rudyer full upon himself. Then he seemed to understand that she had put as wrong an interpretation upon anything she might have seen as the husband himself.

The latter's conduct annoyed him. He watched his wife closely, and it might have been jealousy ; and whenever she turned to speak to Dallas, the latter was sensible that the other man's eyes—large, light blue, and staring eyes he had—were fixed steadily on him.

"Working out a fallacy," was Dallas's silent, mental comment. "Thinks he's suddenly come plump on a secret of his pretty young wife, and he's reckoning me up, like a bale of goods. Going to be pleasant visit this. I've already been brought in for one cross-examination ; I escaped a sentimental scene with another man's wife, and put up the back of the man himself ; and after thinking a jolly girl was glad to see me, have created a prejudice in her mind against me that has turned her into a calculating machine, and

changed me in her view from a friend into a suitable subject for cold analysis."

And with that he turned to Margery and discussed a new novel which had just been issued, conscious all the time that the girl on the other side of the table was listening critically, and assaying the genuineness of every word he spoke.

After dinner his eyes were opened still more.

He drew away from some of the others, and was standing in the dark of the deepening twilight, smoking meditatively, by himself, and leaning against the side of the house, when his reverie was broken by some one saying in a sharp and somewhat peremptory manner :

"I think we'd better have a word together."

He turned quickly, and found Mr. Rudyer close by his side.

"Certainly," said Dallas, wondering what new thing was going to happen.

"Then as we don't want to be either interrupted or overheard, perhaps you'll follow me," and Mr. Rudyer led the way in silence to a path at some distance from the house.

"This'll do," he said, suddenly facing round. "Now, please to understand I'm a business man, accustomed to look into things for myself, and not afraid to figure them up at any time, no matter the state of the ledger. You'll understand what I mean, for I hear you're 'cute enough. What I want from you is a plain answer to a plain question. What does this mean ?"

"That may be a plain question to you, but it is not

so to me," answered Dallas. "If you make it plain, I'll answer it."

"I'll soon do that. Your name is Hugh Dallas?"

"Yes."

"You're an old friend of my wife's?"

"Yes."

"You were engaged to her once upon a time?"

"Five years ago it was broken off."

"My wife has been staying here several weeks?"

"Yes."

"And you've been visiting here all that time?"

"I have been here several times."

"You've walked alone with her, boated with her, played tennis with her; and this afternoon the first I saw of you was with my wife clinging to your arm, and then dropping on to a seat, so agitated that when I got to her she couldn't speak for her tears. Is that so?"

"Except that you have somewhat exaggerated the incidents, it is mainly correct," said Dallas quietly.

"Then you can perhaps begin to grasp my meaning. I'm a plain man in my dealings with men, and say the thing I mean. I love my wife, sir; although perhaps you think I'm a fool for doing it, and a snob for speaking of it. But I'm neither. I've said it because I'm not fool enough to let my wife run risks. What I want to know is this, why are you, an old lover of my wife's, hanging about her here in the way I've said, sailing under false colors, winning the confidence of the people of the house, holding yourself out for a man of honor and a gentleman, and yet having a secret understanding with my wife of such a kind as

to lead to the scene I witnessed this afternoon? Now, I ask again, what does it mean?"

It was some considerable time before Dallas answered.

"Most men would be pretty well roused by such a speech as that," he said at length, after considering what answer he should make, and struggling to prevent his temper rising. His voice, however, was sharp, and clear, and metallic. "And if I were to turn on my heel and tell you to go to the devil, it would be doing what the majority would say served you right. But I sha'n't do that. You want an answer plain and convincing, I suppose, don't you?" he asked.

"Why else should I have asked the question?" retorted the other.

"You shall have it, and make the best of it. You're not built like ordinary men—you make your insinuations and cast your sneers wholesale. I'll borrow your method, and don't blame me if it hurts you. Something of what you've said is true—more is untrue—and the abominable deduction you've drawn as to my conduct is just one big infernal lie. If you want the whole truth as to the feelings I have for your wife, here it is." His manner grew very stern and angry. "Take her away—the sooner the better; and keep her away alike from me and from those whom I know or for whom I have any concern, and for whom I don't think she's a fit companion. And the more effectually you prevent her from ever crossing my path again, the more ready I shall be to forgive you the wanton insult you have given me to-night." And with that he turned away.

His own words had helped to rouse him, and his anger toward Mrs. Rudyer was keen. Not enough that she should pester him with her smirking attentions and cause misapprehensions among his friends—that was the rub—but this fool of a husband must single him out for abuse.

"Mr. Dallas, Mr. Dallas," cried Mr. Rudyer, hurrying after him. He was eager to apologize for what the intense earnestness of Dallas had already convinced him were unjust suspicions. He was partly afraid, too, of a possible scene with his wife.

"What now?" asked Dallas curtly.

"I have wronged you. I feel I have made a miscalculation. I am sorry. Indeed, I am; very sorry. Will you accept my apologies? I am sure you will understand my feelings. I couldn't make out what I saw. I am very sorry I have wronged you. I withdraw every word I have said, fully and frankly."

"Take your wife away, man, and keep her away. That is the best apology you can make," he answered. Then dropping the brusque bluntness, he said, in a more natural tone: "If you knew how absolutely and grotesquely you had misunderstood the whole position, you would be ashamed of yourself, as a plain British merchant, for having speculated in such wild absurdities without taking the trouble to make a single inquiry as to the condition of the goods or the state of trade."

"Well, I can only repeat my regret," said Mr. Rudyer, feeling the sting of satire in this.

"There is no need; keep that to brood over, when you come to find out how ridiculous you have been.

As for the rest—while we are guests in the same house, that is, until Monday morning—we can take mutual measures for the courteous avoidance of one another. After Monday, you and I, and your wife and I, will be absolute strangers, never willingly, so far as I am concerned, to meet again. And now, if you please, I will go my way alone."

Then he returned quickly to the house.

CHAPTER XVII.

"HURRAH! here's Mr. Dallas; now I'll just tell him, Nan. Mr. Dallas, do come here, and just help me to wig Nan; she's been behaving in a most disgusting fashion."

"Guy, be quiet at once," cried Nan, blushing crimson, and looking angrily at her brother. Then she turned, and said, somewhat stiffly, "Good-morning, Mr. Dallas."

"Good morning. What is the matter?"

"After a restless night, Hugh Dallas had risen rather early and gone out into the grounds before breakfast.

"It's nothing at all that concerns any one—only some of Guy's nonsense. I've no time to listen to it. I'm going in."

"Oh, no, you're not," said Guy quickly, catching her by the arm and holding her, while he laughed mischievously. "You're ashamed of yourself, my lady, I can see. It's just this. This young lady has been playing fast and loose with my chum, Don Ramsey, and treating him in a beastly fashion. She's a beastly flirt—ah, would you; but you won't get free, don't you see," he cried, as the girl made a vigorous effort to wrest her arm away from him.

"I'm not trying to do anything of the kind," said Nan loftily. "If your boy's chatter pleases you, and

if Mr. Dallas cares to stand and listen to such nonsense, I don't mind."

"No, I see that," retorted the boy, with a grin. "That's why you tried to break away. You must know, Mr. Dallas, that Don and Nan have always been spoons; and she's led him on until he's most awfully gone on her. I know that, and she knows it, too."

"Don't be so silly, Guy. Let me go this instant. I shall get cross directly."

"All right, get cross," he replied, laughing again.

"Then would you believe it, just when she knows that he's more spoons than ever, she chucks him over, and flirts in the most abominable and barefaced manner with that beast, Bob Momerie, just because the measly little beggar has got no end of coin and all that? Now, isn't that just a beastly chouse?"

"I'm afraid I know nothing about it," said Dallas.

"Ah, you would jolly soon if you'd been here all this last week."

"Does it afford you much pleasure to take a part in this ridiculous scene, Mr. Dallas?" asked the girl, flashing a look at him.

"I think Guy ought to let you go if you wish to," he answered.

"Oh, yes, and then she'd scoot. Not me. She's got to have a wigging, and you'll have to promise, my lady, to stow it, or else I vow I'll tell everybody about —you know," he said, shaking and nodding his head mysteriously.

"It is to me quite indifferent what you do or say," said Nan quietly.

"Is it?" he returned, with a threatening laugh. "What would you say to this, Mr. Dallas? Oh!" he cried out suddenly, dropping his hold of her and clasping his hand to his arm, into which Nan had thrust a pin with great force and energy. "You little vixen," he called after her, for immediately she felt herself free, she had run off with a light laugh. "I'll pay you out, see if I don't." Then he turned with a pleasant smile to Dallas. "One too many for me that time, wasn't she? You have to get up awfully early to catch Nan asleep, I can tell you. But it's true about that Momerie, and I think it's wretched hard lines on old Don. Do you know the Momeries, Mr. Dallas? Awful bounders, I think," he said, with the reckless criticism of youth.

"I'm afraid I should hardly be pleased with that opinion if I did know them," answered Dallas.

"No, I'm afraid I should have put my foot in it rather," answered Guy, coloring. "But then I knew you weren't likely to cotton to people of that sort. I can't think whatever Nan sees in the chap. But you'll have a chance of judging for yourself to-day. He's coming over this afternoon. See if you don't think he's a bounder. And old Don's awfully gone on Nan. He is, really. I never saw such a case. I hate a flirt. I told Nan before you came up to us just now that I did; and that as I'm the head of the family—I am that, you know, as the only man—I'd be hanged if I'd put up with it."

"What did she say?" asked Dallas, amused.

"Oh, you know what sort of a girl Nan is. She laughed, and pretended she didn't care a rap for what

I said. But she did; just as old Marge does. But then girls always look up to a fellow. Eh, what?" he stopped and colored, as at that moment he caught Dallas smiling at him.

"You're quite right to discourage flirting, Guy," said Dallas gravely. "But some day you'll come to learn that the easiest way of getting some young ladies not to do a certain thing is not by ordering them to avoid it."

"Oh, case of a pig, you mean—pull his tail and he'll run forward. Ah, but Nan's not like a pig in that way."

"Not in any way, I trust," said Dallas, startled at the abrupt and practical construction put on his words.

"Well, I'll tell Nan you think she's a pig if she continues to flirt with that beggar Momerie," and before Dallas could get out a protest, the lad had gone into the house, leaving Dallas half amused, half irritated at the turn things had taken and by what he had heard; and the event of the afternoon deepened his dissatisfaction.

As the result of one or two conversations between Dallas and Godfrey, the latter seemed easier in his mind than he had been, and Captain Drury, after the early dinner which they always had at the Manor House on Sunday, asked Dallas to go with him for a short walk. In the course of this, the captain spoke very freely about Godfrey, telling the other how it had pleased him that Godfrey, in a moment of trouble, had chosen Dallas as the friend whom he had hurried to consult, and he was full of gratitude.

"I am glad he came to you, Mr. Dallas, as glad as

if he had come to me. He didn't come to me, you know, in this matter ; but of course I can understand that he might not care to bring such a bother to me. I know there was some kind of trouble ; Margery told me—asked me in fact what it was—and told me he had evidently been to see you about it. I don't want to ask him ; I daresay he thought it would worry me—though of course it would not."

He paused just a moment as if to give the other an opportunity of speaking. But Dallas said nothing, and then the captain resumed :

"Still, what I'm glad to see is the good you've done him. He's not like the same lad. And that's made me wish just to say a word to you and ask you if you could do me a little favor. I should like you to come over as often as you can during the time from now to the marriage. Could you come each week?"

"I will try," said Dallas readily. He had his own reasons for gladly accepting the invitation.

"I wish you would," said the old man. "You do him more good than Alan. Alan's a dear fellow—I love him like a son ; but, I don't know how it is—a matter of temperament, I suppose—but somehow Alan and Godfrey have never seemed to draw together. But you—why, I declare I believe you have already more influence with Godfrey than I have," and the captain laughed.

The two men talked over the subject of Godfrey during the whole of the walk.

They turned at length, and taking a path which led from the coast line where they had been walking to a part of the Manor House grounds, they entered by a

small gate of which the captain had the key. The path from this led to the house past the spot from which Dallas on the previous day had caught the glimpse of Nan which had so pleased him.

When he saw to what point the path was leading them, he recalled his sensations of the previous day and smiled both at himself and at them. It was so stupid, he thought, to be pleased just because he had seen a girl in a white frock, lying in a hammock, who had been pleased to see him.

He glanced across to where the hammock had been slung, and then the smile faded very quickly out of his face.

Nan was there again, but she was not alone.

"Ha, there's young Momerie," said the captain. "I don't think you've met him, have you?"

"No—but I've heard of him," replied Dallas.

"Good-hearted young fellow, though not brilliant," said the captain, who never had any but a good word for any one.

"A favorite with—with the young folks?"

"I fancy he is. He's been here a good deal lately."

Nan seemed to think well of him, thought Dallas, when he saw that the girl's face was flushed and her eyes quite bright with pleased excitement.

Dallas greeted the young fellow cordially, telling himself that there must probably be something in him if such a girl as Nan really cared for him.

"Have you seen Alan, Mr. Dallas?" asked Nan.

"No. Has he come over?"

"Yes. We said we'd send you to him if we saw you first. He's in the library with your old friend,

Mrs. Rudyer," she said, with significant emphasis, as it seemed to Dallas.

"Ho, ho, want to get rid of us, eh?" laughed the captain. "Come along, Mr. Dallas."

"Uncle!" cried the girl, while the young Momerie guffawed.

"Thank you; I'll go to him," replied Dallas quietly, moving away with the captain. "Seems a quiet sort of fellow," he remarked to the latter.

"Yes; Nan seems to think he likes to be quiet, too," returned the captain, with a laugh. "I'm sorry we were out when Alan came. He doesn't look to me to have been quite as well lately as he generally is. He hasn't been in such good spirits as usual. But then we haven't seen quite so much of him as we used to."

They met Alan and Mr. and Mrs. Rudyer coming out on to the terrace together as they reached it, and after a few minutes the two friends drew apart from the others.

"You're not looking very fit, old man," said Dallas.

"I'm not feeling very brilliant. I fancy I want a bit of a change. I'm going away in a bit, yachting."

"When? and where?" asked the other, looking up.

"You mean am I going to stop for the—marriage? Oh, yes; but I mean to have a goodish spell then."

"Ah, you may put off that trip for a while then."

"How do you mean? Anything up? I haven't been here for some days, and haven't spoken to any one yet. I wanted to get a word with Nan, but that young Momerie's been hanging round here ever since I came this afternoon. Has anything—" He stopped, and looked with some eagerness into his friend's face.

"No, nothing that I—know."

"What do you mean, then? You had a meaning."

"You never can tell what will happen. That's all. I shouldn't fix up my arrangements too definitely, if I were you, although I hear now that the thing is to come off three weeks next Tuesday."

Alan's face fell, and he looked thoughtful. Then he took out a cigarette and lighted it before replying.

"I don't quite see why you started that other idea. I—well, I suppose I'm a fool—but I'd a good mind to run over and see you on Friday, to have a chat about a rather curious thing that happened. I had a half-sneaking kind of thought that I might have heard some good news here to-day."

"Why?" asked Dallas, when the other man paused.

"Of course I don't attach any importance to it, but the truth is"—here he gave a short laugh, as if at himself—"I had an anonymous letter on Friday—"

"The devil you did!" interposed Hugh Dallas, so emphatically that the other looked at him in surprise.

"Yes, I did. But why does that surprise you?"

"Why, indeed?" laughed the other. "Everybody has learnt to write nowadays. But what was it about?"

"Well, don't be surprised if I seem to have been ass enough to think it could mean anything. But I did, and the idea has been plaguing me so confoundedly for two days, that when you seemed to hint just now that there was a hitch, or might be one, I couldn't for the life of me help thinking that in some way or other the two things were going to join. I have the letter here."

He flushed slightly as he took it out of his pocket and held it out to Dallas.

"No envelope?" asked the latter.

"I destroyed it, or lost it, or something."

"That's unwise. Often that's the only kind of signature an anonymous letter has. Well thumbed," he said, after examining it. "You've read it pretty often, Alan."

"Yes," this with a nervous laugh.

This was the letter:

"A friend who knows your wishes sends this to tell you not to be down-hearted. The marriage won't take place. You'll hear news in a day or two."

"H'm! Oracular; but not much in it. What do you think of it?"

Hugh Dallas asked the question that he might have time to consider what was the best course for him to take—whether or not to speak of the letter he had received. He saw in a moment that this third letter had emanated from the same source as the others; and this confirmed his own view that there was something which would repay inquiry. But he had no wish to raise Alan's hopes only to discourage him again, and arguing that, as the latter had thought himself into a condition of comparative resignation, it would be wisest, for the present at all events, not to unsettle him.

"No; it's what do *you* think of it?" was Alan's reply.

"Frankly, I don't think much of any anonymous letter," replied Dallas deliberately, as he folded up the

letter and returned it. "And in such a case as this of all others."

"No, I suppose not," replied Alan, hiding his disappointment at the answer under a laugh. Then he lit another cigarette. "I told you you'd think me a fool. But I couldn't understand why any one should want to take the trouble to write to me at all, if there wasn't something at the bottom of it."

"Who do you suppose did write it?"

"I haven't the ghost of a notion. That's what puzzled me. There's nobody knew anything about me and M—Miss Allingham. Nobody could know."

"Somebody seems to have made a very decent shot, at any rate," said Dallas. "But you'd better put the thing out of your head. At best it could only be somebody who had made a guess at your—your feelings. They could not by any means under heaven know of the real reason for this engagement—unless Miss Margery, or Miss Nan, or I wrote the letter. And yet that very reason which nobody knows is the one insuperable difficulty which stands in the way of a rupture. Thus there could be no cause for any one to tell you to look out for the breaking of the engagement. See that?"

"Yes, I see it when you put it that way," was the answer, spoken slowly, and after a pause. Then, with a laugh, "Well, I'll try to give up thinking anything of it. In fact, I should be an ass if I didn't. But a fellow clutches at a straw at a time like this, and that's the truth."

"You won't think me wrong to put it so plainly? But it's best to face the facts full front."

"Yes, I know that; and I— But there, I may as well confess—you haven't knocked it all out of me even yet."

They both laughed at this, and then some of the others came up to them.

In the evening they went out together again to smoke on the terrace, and stood in a corner where a jutting window shielded them from observation. Alan Ramsay had forgotten his cigar-case, and went to fetch it, leaving his friend alone.

Dallas was gazing abstractedly across the landscape which stretched away in front of that part of the Manor House, when he heard the rustling of a silk dress, and a light footfall sounded close by him, and a hand touched his arm lightly.

"I must speak to you for a moment. I've been waiting for a chance all the day." It was Mrs. Rudyer. "I want to thank you for having done what I asked you—about Nan. I do thank you. I thought you would, when you knew how it pained me. You are as thoughtful as ever. I have been wrong. You are not changed, Hugh," and her hand pressed his arm slightly.

Despite the annoyance which he felt at Mrs. Rudyer's conduct, his sense of humor was roused by the thought that she should have mistaken the marked avoidance of him by Nan for a desire on his part to avoid the girl in order to please Mrs. Rudyer. His inclination to laugh was so strong that it prevented his replying, lest she should misunderstand him still more. But he moved his arm away from her.

"Yes, yes, I know you are quite right," she said in

answer to this gesture. "But I am in terrible distress. Have you heard? Mr. Rudyer finds he must go back to London to-morrow, and I have to go with him. I thought I should have no chance of bidding you good-by, and I was wretched. I dare not stay a moment now, but I felt I must tell you how much it touched me to find you ready to *do* what I asked, although, of course, you could not say what you feel. I understand that. It breaks my heart to have to go away, but I shall at least have this last bright thought to cheer me."

"This is preposterous," said Hugh, his indignation and anger rising fast.

"Yes, I know all you would say. Of course, you are obliged to say it. Heaven forbid that anything else should be said while things are as they are. Hush —who's that?"

Footsteps were heard on the terrace, and Mrs. Rudyer, as if in fear, pressed close to Hugh's side, as though to get out of sight.

"Please do not act in this extraordinary way," he said; "you will compromise yourself and me."

"H—sh, h—sh, wait till they have passed, and then I'll go."

"I think you're very ridiculous, and that's all about it, Mr. Momerie," said Nan's voice, to Hugh Dallas's infinite chagrin.

"Well, Guy said it, and said you were one," came the reply in a man's voice.

"Nonsense; Guy knows nothing at all about it. Guy's a boy. The only kind of flirting that is utterly abominable, and despicable, and dishonorable, is flirt-

ing with married people," said Nan. "But I don't think you would do that."

"No, hang it all, I should draw the line there," and with that the voices died away.

Nan's words had been uttered in a tone which suggested strongly that they had been spoken to be overheard. Both the listeners thought this.

"She must have followed me," whispered Mrs. Rudyer. "She's so sly."

"You'd better go back into the house, please," said Dallas grimly, "or you may hear something from me which will not be pleasant," and he stepped out on the terrace and turned toward the French window leading into one of the rooms. "All I will say now—all I can trust myself to say is, that you are deluding yourself absolutely, and the sooner you understand that the better."

"I understand now," she answered, smiling with provoking sweetness. "Like you, I am too full to speak. Good-by. We must wait."

And with that she went, leaving the man aghast at the persistency with which she distorted his words, and both angry and uncomfortable at what had occurred.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A GREAT pressure of work, owing to an unexpected Parliamentary election and to a number of heavy local matters, kept Dallas from giving much attention to anything except the work on his paper during the next week. On the Saturday he found himself quite unable to go to the Manor House as had been arranged with the captain, and he wired to say so.

In reply to his telegram he had a very friendly letter from the captain, urging him to go over the following week, as well as from Godfrey, seconding the invitation.

In the meantime, no answer had been received to the notice which had been inserted in the paper, and Hugh Dallas began to think that, after all, it was merely an ill-timed joke on some one's part, and when he thought about it, he was disposed to attribute the whole thing to Mrs. Rudyer.

"Women will do such infernally curious things that it's no use trying to look for what ordinary people would consider a motive. I suppose she must have picked up some bit of gossip about some woman named Southerst, and pulled the bow at a venture. I'm glad I sat on Alan's hopefulness. Poor old fellow. I'm afraid he'll feel it."

On the afternoon of the Saturday after he had wired that he could not go to Seacove, he had a surprise.

A telegram came for him.

"Mr. Rudyer died suddenly two hours ago. Am in great trouble. Can you possibly come to me. Need advice and assistance in many things. Do come if possible.—Beatrice Rudyer."

"Phew! Here's pretty how d'ye do!" he exclaimed, with a whistle, getting up from his desk to walk about the room and think. "I can't go. Gad, there was a time when that message would have drawn me half across the world. But, after that last business— No, hang it, I can't go. I can't get away. Besides, if I was to set off to London after wiring that I couldn't go to Seacove the people at the Manor House would think it awfully curious"—"one of the people" meant Nan, but he didn't own this to himself even. "I should like to help her, if she really is in a mess. But she has her mother; and heaps of people must be ready to help her. 'Tisn't as if she were poor. Yet, one feels rather a brute not to go. But, then, she's such a little humbug. You never know whether what she says is right or wrong. 'Am in great trouble.' What trouble? I believe it's all fiddle-faddle. But, there, I simply can't get away. Even if I wished to go, I couldn't. And certainly I don't wish to go. No, I sha'n't go. I shall wire and say I'm awfully sorry, but I can't go."

He took out a telegram form, and wrote rapidly

"To Mrs. Rudyer,—Deeply sorry to hear of your bereavement. Cannot possibly get away at this mo-

ment. Accept fullest sympathy and condolence.—DALLAS."

"There, that'll do. By Jove, it'll be a bad time for her; but she's got her head screwed on in the right way, and there will be plenty of people about to look after the business arrangements. Expect she'll be well off, and she'll know how to enjoy it all after a time. Now, let us see, where was I?" and he turned again to his work.

But he could not fix his attention upon it closely; and the thought that he had in reality acted rather unkindly in not going to Mrs. Rudyer at such a time was sufficiently strong to cause him some uneasiness.

Later in the afternoon she wired again:

"Your telegram a great disappointment. I am ill and in trouble. You might come to me.—BEATRICE."

But this only had the opposite effect from that which the sender had designed.

"She's humbugging. 'You might come to me.' I know what that means. Like that tomfoolery at Seacove. Hankering to hark back to the past. Not for me, thank you."

"Regret quite impossible.—DALLAS."

And after he had received and sent off the second telegrams, he was more satisfied.

When he reached the office on the Monday, there was a letter from her which had been delivered on the Sunday morning. It was a singular composition, partly reproachful, full of protestations of grief and

trouble, and need of help and guidance, and with an undercurrent of suggested affection. The letter irritated him.

At mid-day there came another, posted on the Sunday, and this hinted that she was really very ill, alone, and wretched, and begged him to go to her.

He would not go, however, and wired again to say so.

She attacked him, then, in a different way.

"There are many things I want advice on. Can you advise me if I write you?" she wired.

"Better consult your lawyer," he replied.

"Some very private. Am writing," she answered; and then he saw he might as well give it up. In this way she started a correspondence, and, during the days that followed, she sent him always one letter, and often two, each day. Most of them asked a question or two on some trivial points, while all were well filled with long descriptions of her feelings and wishes, etc., being written with an air of absolutely confidential frankness.

This correspondence led matters on, until after four or five days had passed, he received a letter in which was a passage:

"I am much broken by all that has passed, and when I think of all that has yet to be done, I don't know how I shall get through. I must have rest and sympathy. I have written to dearest Margery to ask her if she can possibly put up with me for a few days at the dear old Manor House. It will be such a comfort to be among friends again; and to have you close at hand to whom I can turn with such confidence for

advice and help after this correspondence. I hope to go there almost at once."

"Hang the woman," was the brief eloquence with which Dallas commented on the passage. But he could do nothing to prevent her carrying out her design, although he resolved to go over himself before she could arrive. He had a reason for this, as there had been a further communication from his mysterious correspondent.

It came on the Wednesday after he was to have gone to the Manor House, and was as follows:

"You took no notice of my last letter, and have done nothing. You were at Seacove on Sunday week and could have made inquiries about what I told you. I waited, thinking you were going over again last Saturday, when I thought you might act. The marriage is fixed to take place in less than a fortnight, and you know this well. If you want to prevent a crime, and to stop an innocent girl being ruined, you'll act at once. If you don't, other means will be found next week; and whatever they are, you'll be to blame. Look out.

"One Who Knows."

"The plot seems to thicken," said Dallas, when he had read this. "There's a different tone about this. It is much more like a letter which Godfrey's correspondent would write. There's the vague threat which speaks the female mind—or the weak man's. But it's a woman, sure enough. No one but a woman would have put in that touch in the other letter about the

pity for a cripple. It's some one, too, who is well posted in what goes on at the Manor House. Whoever she is, she doesn't seem to have seen my notice in the paper. If only everybody would make a practice of reading the *News*, how convenient it would be! Still, I'll try another notice, and I'll put something into the advertising columns as well." And then he wrote out both, simply asking the writer of the letter to communicate with him.

On Saturday morning there was an answer saying :

"I have seen the advertisement ; but I mean to wait and see what you do. You are going to Seacove on Saturday. You'll find some news there. It ought to be easy for you to act now.

"One Who Knows."

"How the dickens does she get to know what I'm going to do!" he mused, as he read and thought over the letter in the train on his way to the Manor House. "She either lives in the house, or has some one there who keeps her thoroughly posted. I must think of that. Looks as though she's only learnt since Tuesday, when she must have written the last letter, that I'm going over this week end ; else she'd have mentioned it then. It's a singular mixture all round. What will the news be that she speaks of? She's done one thing," he murmured, as he leant back in the carriage and held his cigar up, turning it round and round as if critically examining the ash—"she's made me believe in her. There will be news of some sort and in some way connected with her, whoever she is—of

that I feel sure." Then he suddenly broke the thread of his thoughts and exclaimed aloud, "I hope that woman won't be there," and this led him to the subject of all the circumstances of the last visit and so to Nan. And with her his thoughts were content to stay some time.

He went by the same way from the station as at his last visit, and when he reached the point at which he had then caught sight of Nan, he glanced involuntarily towards the spot where the hammock had been slung. But neither the hammock nor the girl was there today. He caught sight of her directly afterwards, however, walking to and fro on the terrace, and his pulses quickened slightly as the question flashed upon him whether she had been looking out for his coming.

"More probably waiting for young Momerie," he murmured to himself the next minute. "By Jove, she was looking out for me. Here she comes. She doesn't look as she did last time, though."

"I have been waiting to ask a question," said the girl, in a very formal and somewhat distant manner, after they had shaken hands. "It concerns Margery, or I shouldn't have troubled you—" and she flashed a defiant look at him. "Margery wishes to speak to you as soon as possible about this," holding out a letter to him. "She received it this morning ; and as we—as she did not know whom to speak to about it, and we didn't know what to do about it, I—she thought of you. She's very sorry to trouble you ; we both are —especially at a time when you have so much trouble among your own friends," with a great deal of accent on the last word.

"I am sorry your sister should think that anything I can do for her would be considered a trouble."

"I don't think Margery does think it," said Nan.

"Oh, it is only you that are unjust to me." The girl flushed and looked up impatiently. "Shall I read the letter now? What is it?"

"Margery thought she would like you to read it quietly by yourself and then think it over. That was why she made me wait and look out and give it you. I'll go and tell Margery you've come."

He watched her as she walked across the lawn and into the house; and, after she had gone indoors, continued to gaze after her, very thoughtfully. And somehow, although he could not explain why and although it was apparently in direct contradiction to the girl's attitude towards him, he felt rather pleased at the result of the conversation.

"I suppose this is the promised 'news,'" he said, as he turned away and unfolded the letter. It was:

"If you think you are doing cleverly to marry the cripple who will one day own the Manor House, and if you think you can succeed in cheating him into a belief that you are marrying him for love—you're a fool for your pains. You won't do this. Those are on the watch who know the facts, and they'll take care that the cripple's eyes are opened to the truth. What sort of a woman are you to be willing to marry such a one just for his money, when you don't love him? You know why you don't love him. Such a marriage is a sin. But there's more behind. Ask Mr.

Dallas when he is at the Manor House to-morrow. He knows a lot. "A Well-Wisher."

"There's no doubt about that being from a woman at any rate, whatever may be said of the rest. It clears the ground, too, somewhat. If the woman isn't masking some of her knowledge, it shows that she knows nothing about the real motive of this engagement. If she had known it, she'd have gone straight to the point, and have opened the old captain's eyes. It shows, too, that she either doesn't know Margery herself, or, knowing her, hates her—all of which points strongly to a powerful personal feeling against the girl. Why should that be? Why, indeed, if this woman"—shaking the letter in his hand—"doesn't want to marry him herself? Now then, who the deuce can that be?"

He took two or three turns on the terrace, thinking intently, pulling vigorously at a cigarette he had lighted.

"I'm beginning to see the way," he said, at length; "but it will be a stiff climb. Meanwhile, what am I to say to these girls?" Then his face broke into a smile. "I'm glad it was Nan who thought of consulting me; and I think I'm more glad that she tried to hide that fact just now, and only let it out by accident."

At that moment the girl came to one of the French windows.

"Margery is in the library, Mr. Dallas. Will you come to her there?"

"Certainly, Miss Nan," said Dallas readily.

"It's very good of you to come and take pity on us," said Nan, as they passed through the house to the library.

"Take pity on you?" he echoed.

"Yes. I'm afraid you'll find the place very dull"—she spoke a little nervously—"I mean now that our —our visitors have gone."

"I have been over to see you and not your visitors," answered Dallas.

"Yes, it's very kind to say so. We were very sorry you could not come last week."

He was quick to see that she connected the fact of his absence with the departure of the Rudyers.

"You and I seem to look at the same event, and to draw very different conclusions from it, Miss Nan," he said. "Last week I was kept away by urgent press of matters connected with my paper."

"It is very sad about poor Mr. Rudyer, is it not?" asked Nan, as she turned and looked at him, and smiled with sweet sarcasm. "Poor, dear Beatrice; I am afraid she will feel it very much. We expected her here to-day. Ah, you are surprised." And before Hugh Dallas could make any answer, or could tell her that he had declined going to London because he wished to come to the Manor House, the door of the library opened, and Margery stood with outstretched hand waiting to greet him

CHAPTER XIX.

"Uncle and Godfrey have gone to see about some alterations on one of the farms, Mr. Dallas; and uncle said that with your strong views on the land question, he was sure you would think a tenant had more right to his landlord's time than even a guest to that of his host, and that you would therefore excuse him for not being here when you arrived."

Margery said this as they shook hands.

"Certainly," answered Dallas. "I would rather be treated without ceremony—like a friend of the family."

"It is just in that character I want to speak to you about that letter. When Nan urged me to talk quite frankly to you, I did not like to do that at first; but I have come to her way of thinking, you see. What do you make of the letter?"

At the reference to Nan's part, Dallas had turned to her and saw that she colored.

"You see, your name was mentioned in the letter, and we didn't know what that might mean," said Nan, as if explaining away what Margery had said. "Otherwise, of course, we should not have thought of you."

"Of course not," he replied.

"I don't say that," said Margery. "If I consult you, it is far more as a friend of Godfrey's and uncle's and everybody's, than because your name is mentioned

in the letter. Do you know anything, as this wretched letter says? I mean, is there any reason why one should take the slightest notice of such a thing? I feel almost ashamed of myself for even giving it a second thought."

"It is a coincidence that this morning I received a letter on the same topic—the second I have had—but I do not attach importance to any letter to which a writer dares not put his name." As he was answering, Dallas was conscious that Nan's eyes were fixed very searchingly upon his face, as if to read his thoughts.

"You do not know of any one who could—I mean—who could put such ideas into Godfrey's head as one here suggested?" said Margery, in considerable confusion.

"I do not know of any one," said Dallas.

"You would not take any notice of this?" she asked. "What could you do?"

"That is just it. But why, I wonder, are you brought into it? What can any one want to write to you?"

"Either truthfully, or as a mask in order to make mischief, the writer gave as the reason that I was a public man. There seems to be a common impression that an editor is a sort of unofficial policeman and father confessor combined, to whom any one can go to get him to do what they are afraid to do themselves. That, however, is scarcely my own view of my work. I have no mission of the kind."

"Then I may destroy the letter, you think?" asked Margery.

"Certainly, unless you would like me to keep it in the extraordinary event of anything coming from this?"

She gave him the letter, and then the conversation became more general, and after a while they went out on to the terrace, where, for a few minutes, Nan and Dallas were left alone.

"Why do you give us just half-confidences?" asked the girl suddenly.

"Have I done so? When?" he replied.

"Just now. Margery could not see it because she was naturally somewhat nervous at speaking to you at all about the matter. But I could see it plainly enough. When did you have that first letter?"

"Oh, some days ago."

"Exactly. Just about the time when Godfrey made that mysterious visit to you, I suppose, and then you came over here and had confabs with him. Are you sure you 'attach no importance,' as you said, to an anonymous letter?" She was now serious.

"What is it you wish to ask me?" he said. "Tell me plainly, and if I can answer you, I will."

"You know more about this matter than you told us just now in the library, do you not?"

"There are certain circumstances dealing with one phase of it which I know; but at the same time I *know* no more of the meaning of it than yourselves."

"I suppose that is a very diplomatic answer; but it is certainly not clear. What are the certain circumstances?"

"I am afraid I am not at liberty to say."

"Do they concern Godfrey? or are they in any way connected with his visit to you at Middlingham?"

"You would make a good cross-examining counsel," he said, smiling.

"If I were one you would be compelled to answer, and not run away from the questions," she retorted.

"I am afraid I must in this case run away from them. I should like to tell you; but for the moment I cannot."

"Yet you could give Margery advice to take no notice of the letter," retorted Nan, as it seemed to him, a little indignantly. "I doubt if you realize all the misery that this marriage means to her."

"At present I can say no more than I have said. I am sorry," he answered.

"I suppose you feel that women can't be trusted," she answered sarcastically.

"On the contrary, there is no one whom I would rather speak on this subject with absolute confidence than to you, Miss Nan," said Dallas earnestly.

"It is perhaps well that some of your friends cannot hear you say that, or they might think we had been quarreling again, and patching up a truce," said the girl, casting a somewhat angry look at him as she left him hurriedly and went indoors.

"There spoke the woman," said Dallas to himself; "'variable as the shade, by the light quivering aspen made.' But I am afraid she has half a thought that I'm not running exactly straight in the matter. Well, I can't help it." This with an expression on his face that showed he was not pleased. "I wish to goodness they wouldn't make me the hub for all these spokes to be stuck into and go whizzing round without a tire to keep them properly apart. I'm hanged if I see where the wheel's running to. But I'll put a ques-

tion or two to Godfrey, and see if I can make anything out of him."

He found a chance of doing this on the afternoon of the next day, when they strolled out together on to the cliffs.

"You have heard no more of that matter which worried you, I suppose, have you?" he asked, in a somewhat indifferent tone.

"What matter?" asked Godfrey, looking with a swift, inquiring glance.

"That anonymous correspondent."

"Oh, that. No; nothing."

"I am glad to hear it. You are looking better."

"Yes; I am sorry I made so much of it," answered Godfrey, with some hesitation. "It is a thing I ought to have kept to myself. I had no right to—to go talking about it. But for the moment it maddened me." And he frowned at the recollection. "But—"

"Of course the mention of my name was enough to make any one anxious to probe it, at all events to the extent of asking me a question," said Dallas, reading the other's thought.

"Yes; that's exactly what I mean."

Then he seemed to grow nervous suddenly. He cast his eyes about him hither and thither; little hectic spots of color came and went on his cheeks, and he raised his head as if about to say something, but checked himself. This happened once or twice, and then, with a hollow ring in his voice, which revealed his nervousness, he put a question with such evidently acted carelessness, that Dallas was instantly on the alert.

"You must have a great many different kinds of matters come under your attention," he said, clearing his throat with a cough.

"Of course we have; all sorts of things—serious, comic, and tragic—from all sorts of people," he replied.

"How do you manage to remember what has been in and what hasn't?"

"System, of course," answered Dallas shortly, knowing that Godfrey was not after information of that kind.

"I suppose you haven't a record of all the names of persons that pass through the office?"

"Ah, we're coming round to Esther Southerst, as sure as I'm alive," he thought. "Good."

"Well, no," he said, with a smile.

He had thought of helping the other out, but resolved to let him travel his own road.

"I thought that would not be possible, from what I saw when I was at Middlingham in your office last week. I suppose you would have a record of some sort of people going to the office, for instance?"

"Sometimes," answered the other.

"This kind of thing always interests me—I know so little, indeed nothing, of business," said Godfrey. He had thrown off much of his nervousness now. "I remember the junior partner of my father's solicitor once told me he kept a private record—apart from his diary—of every one who entered his office, with the time and subject spoken of, no matter whether business or pleasure."

"A man of method with a particularly orderly brain," replied Dallas.

"That means you wouldn't do that. No, I suppose not. But now in the case of my visit to you—don't let me seem inquisitive, though it is nothing but curiosity—where would you draw the line? I remember you were called to the telephone and took down some particulars with some names—now, would those be recorded?"

His voice had grown nervous again.

"Let me think—what were they? What was the incident?"

"Some accident, I think, in which a woman or some children had been hurt. Wasn't the name South, or Southerly, or Southerst, or something?"

"Southerst. Yes, I think it was, Esther—Southerst."

Then there was a pause, and Dallas, seeing that his companion was trying to recover self-possession, picked up a stone or two and threw them over the edge of the cliff, waiting to watch them fall into the sea.

"No, of course we shouldn't keep any record of a name like that. Besides if I remember I took the name in mistake. Some blundering fellow at the other end of the wire hadn't what I call a telephone voice."

"It's a curious name," said Godfrey.

"Rather. He's brought the talk where he wanted it," he thought, "and now doesn't know what to do next. I'll give him a lift over the stile. Quite strange to me," he said aloud, "at all events till I came here."

"Here?" repeated Godfrey, looking up suddenly.

"Yes, to Middlingham, I mean."

"Do you know any one with the name?"

"No, do you?" he asked casually; but puzzling as to what it was his companion wanted to find out.

"No, I think not. Not now. But it's not an uncommon name about certain parts. It's curious how names keep to certain districts," and then with an air of relief, evident enough to his shrewd listener, Godfrey began to talk generally on that subject.

Once more in the course of the conversation, Dallas detected a return of the symptoms of uneasiness, as Godfrey brought the conversation round again to the subject of the newspaper office and its methods.

"How is it that when anything happens in a district, all the precedents for it are fished up, and parallel cases, or cases nearly parallel, immediately get into the papers? Do you set people to hunt over the back papers? You keep all the back papers, I suppose?" asked Godfrey.

"Certainly. We always have files of our own and other papers, and often a more or less exhaustive system of indexing the papers is carried on."

"Have you any index of your papers?"

"No, I'm sorry to say not. The men before me didn't think it necessary," and at this answer he fancied he could detect a slight expression of relief in the other's eyes.

"Then if a case, which was thought unimportant, occurred, it would not be likely to be remembered?"

"Probably not," said Dallas. "But you must come over and give me an hour or two and go right through the office. It is worth seeing, and you would like it."

"I'll come," said Godfrey and then the topic dropped.

"There's something in that careful carelessness and very curious indifference. There's some case or other that either he wants to rake up or doesn't want me to.

I'll look into that to-morrow," he said, when he was alone.

When he had finished his work the next morning, he sent for Mr. Glyde.

Mr. Glyde was one of a class of men to be found on many provincial papers. He had been thirty or forty years on the staff, never rising above a reporter's position, from lack chiefly of adaptability. He had learned the slow round of sparse duties on the paper when it had been a small weekly, helping when help was wanted in any of the departments, setting the type at times, feeding the old machine, reporting, and sub-editing, equally ready to write notes or a leader if wanted, or to take a turn at addressing the wrappers or even delivering the papers at a pinch—and doing everything in the same routine, dull, mechanical method; he had seen the paper grow, and had helped it to grow first from a small weekly to a large and important county paper, then to a bi-weekly, and at last to a widely circulated evening paper of great value and influence. But he had stood still; and had never shaken off the dull routine methods which had made him a valuable servant enough when circulation was small and leisure abundant. In truth he regretted the old leisurely days when reports, like cheese, mellowed with moderate age, and "up-to-date" was an unwritten phrase, and papers did not strive to palpitate with actuality.

But he had his value yet and his uses. He was an inexhaustible mine of local knowledge and reminiscences; and the rest of the staff were accustomed to sink their shafts into the rich veins of local lore, and

hewing the information in the rough, polish it for use after their wont. He bored them and they bored him in return, as one of them said.

"Mr. Glyde," said Dallas, "I want you to remember a case if you can; I don't exactly know the details; but the person chiefly interested was a woman named Esther Southerst. Can you recall the name?"

"Esther Southerst," said the old man—he was a thin, sparse, white-haired man, with rather heavy white beard, whiskers and mustache—all as unkempt as his clothes—rusty black, invariably—and very untidy and ill-fitting. "Of course I know the name of Southerst well enough. There are the Southersts of Langton, and the Southersts of Bridgweir—but I don't recall there was ever an Esther among them. What family of Southerst would it be, do you think?"

"No family, I should imagine."

"Oh, that's a different sort of thing," answered the man, in the tone of one who has been looking at the wrong volume in a bookcase, and shuts it up and puts it back on the shelf. "Let me think again. Dear me, my memory's getting very treacherous. At one time I should have had the case right off,"—Dallas smiled, as this was his almost invariable remark—"Southerst, Esther Southerst," he said meditatively.

"Never mind now. If you can think of it another time—"

"Stay a moment, Mr. Dallas, it's coming. Yes; I remember a case of an Esther Southerst. Yes, that was the name. She was a girl who tried to commit suicide. Yes, yes, why of course, Mr. Darkly"—this was Dallas's predecessor—"did a note—I'm not sure it wasn't a

short leaderette—on the case, and he came to me to get some details. Fancy me forgetting that. But I can turn the whole thing up in the files," said Mr. Glyde.

"I wish you would, and let me have them."

"Certainly I will. I'll bring them to your room this afternoon," and he hurried away.

"Attempted suicide," mused Dallas, when he was left alone again in his room. "Where are we going now? That case ought to be interesting reading."

In the afternoon Mr. Glyde was as good as his word and brought the files.

"I've found it easily enough," he said. "I remembered after I left you what the point was that Mr. Darkly wanted to bring out. He was a strong advocate of prisoners being allowed to give evidence in their own behalf, and this girl was obstinately silent and wouldn't say a word, though it seemed that something peculiar was behind. And he thought the case offered a reason in favor of his theory. Though why a wench who wouldn't speak when off her oath was likely to speak when she was on it, I never could clearly see. Anyhow Mr. Darkly saw it and wrote it."

It was only a very brief report indeed, but there was matter in it for reflection.

It stated that Esther Southerst was charged with attempting to commit suicide by jumping into the sea at Barrleigh, from the quay, and that she refused to give any explanation of her conduct. She was remanded, and at the second hearing still refused to say a word. Inquiries had been made, but nothing had been found out. She was a stranger whom no one knew, and had arrived in the town from no one knew where in the

afternoon ; and as soon as the tide was in, she had made her attempt and had been rescued. She was described as a dark, sharp-looking, handsome young woman of some two or three and twenty ; and as money was found upon her, want had clearly not been the cause of her crime. What that cause was she refused to say

"There's the leader note," said Mr. Glyde, placing a very lean and very dirty finger on the spot.

Dallas ran his eye quickly over it, looking for the point ; but apparently not finding any. It was a case of a man with a fad having twisted the facts to bear upon the favorite theory.

"Don't think much of the argument either, Mr. Glyde," he said, when he had skimmed the note. "But then the report is very bare and thin. Where is Barrleigh ? "

"It's really almost out of our district. It's a fishing hamlet out Tumbledon way. Do you know that ? "

"No, I can't say I do. I know Seacove. Is it anywhere there ? "

"It's about three miles, maybe four, along the coast from there."

"What ! " said Dallas, feeling suddenly very interested.

"No, it's not more. Barely so much."

"Nothing more was heard of this case, I suppose ? "

"Yes, there was ; I was going to tell you. Mr. Darkly used to have sudden fancies—fads some of us thought them—and now and again he'd send us all scattering to what he called 'work up' things. I remember now in this case (that's why I recollected so small a thing) he called me up and said : 'Glyde, I

fancy we can "work up" something out of this.' 'What's that?' I asked. 'Well, I think if we could get the life of that woman Southerst, either from herself or somebody else, it might make a bit of a splash' —that was another of his phrases. So off I went to go and play spy and private detective on her track."

"Well?" said Dallas. "What did you do? Not a bad notion."

"I don't know about a bad notion, Mr. Dallas; but I don't see that reporters are paid to go spying into the private affairs of suicides," replied the old man.

"All right; go on with the result," answered Dallas, with a smile.

"Well, there was no result to go on with. When I got to the place the woman had gone—vanished; nobody knew where she had gone to any more than where she had come from."

"But you picked up something?"

"Nothing worth even a paragraph. There was some loose talk about there having been something behind; and I got hold of a woman with a tongue as long as a verbatim note, who said the woman had told her, when asked why she had been so quiet, that it paid her better than being noisy. But I got nothing definite. I wasn't sorry. I don't hold with that kind of work. Reporting was reporting in my day, not tale-bearing and gossip-sifting."

"We have to move with the times, Mr. Glyde. Well, thank you. Just let me take a note of the date of the paper. Now you may put the files away. It's an interesting case, but not worth rewriting up." And the old man left the room.

CHAPTER XX.

During the rest of that day Hugh Dallas had that report of Esther Southerst frequently in his thoughts, and though he came readily enough to the conclusion that there was "something behind," he failed to think out any very suggestive solution of the puzzle.

Some two days afterwards, an incident occurred which gave him a considerable shock, and roused in him quite a new sentiment in regard to the proposed marriage.

It had seemed to him so far a piece of regrettable quixotism on the part of Margery Allingham to sacrifice her own and Alan Ramsay's happiness in order to marry Godfrey; regrettable because, as he had once said to Alan, he did not think it would effect the end in view, on account of the singular disposition of the cripple. But he had no thought of meeting it with anything like active opposition. It was no concern of his.

What had happened to bring him into such a conspicuous position had been thrust upon him; and the motive which had instigated him had been more sympathy with his friend, tempered unconsciously with a wish to secure the real happiness of Margery, whom he liked, and unconsciously with a stronger desire to do that which would please Nan.

After he had turned up that record about Esther Southerst he had an instinct of uneasiness about the matter, but it took no positive or definite shape. Suddenly, however, that was changed.

It was his habit, when an event of any considerable importance occurred anywhere within the district which was more particularly that of his paper, to go himself to the spot, in order to acquaint himself, so far as possible, at first hand with the considerations which might be important to him in framing any comments upon it. On the Tuesday a somewhat serious scandal affecting the local authorities of a town near to Seacove was reported, and after he had finished his morning's work on the following day, he determined to run over to the place and see what it meant.

The affair had been largely exaggerated, as a very cursory inquiry convinced him, and he determined, therefore, to go on to the Manor House—it was only some few miles, and the trains fitted—to pay a chance visit.

He was partly guided in this by a wish to have a chat with Godfrey while the case of Esther Southerst was fresh in his own mind, and while his conversation with Godfrey would still be fresh in the latter's.

He walked quickly from the station, and, as he was not expected, deemed it best to go to the house by the ordinary lodge entrance, instead of taking the short cut through the grounds which he had used before. The drive wound through a long avenue of fine trees with thick shrubberies on either side, broken here and there with one or two lawns; while from it several paths led right and left in different directions through the

grounds. On both sides of the drive was a border of turf, and, the afternoon being very hot, Dallas walked on this as a relief from the hot and dusty roadway.

He walked at a good pace, his usual habit, and his quick observant eyes were cast about him in search of some signs of any of the family, and he had covered about half the distance between the lodge and the house when a sound coming from the shrubbery to his left brought him to a standstill.

It was the yelping cry of an animal in pain ; and, when he stood to listen, the sound of blows, quick and violent, with the whistling of a whip lash.

Looking about him, he saw a spot where the shrubbery was thin enough for him to look through, and he ran to it and peered eagerly in the direction from which the sounds came. Any animal in pain found in him a friend and defender, and he meant to go at once to the rescue.

At some distance from the path a dog lay crouching at the foot of a tree, to which he was fastened by a rope, and over him stood Godfrey Drury, with a heavy riding whip, thrashing the poor quivering, yelping, suffering creature with violent and merciless ferocity. The young fellow's face was distorted with the fury of his passion ; his cheeks were deadly white with rage, his lips blue and set, while his eyes flashed with an intensity of absorbed and concentrated passion and vindictive rage.

The look on his face, when it was turned once in his direction, almost frightened Dallas by the depth of potential cruelty which it seemed to reveal. A crowd

of feelings came upon him, overriding even his great sympathies for the poor beaten hound, and holding him silent while he watched.

The dog ceased to howl after a minute, and lay only quivering as he took his fearful punishment in silent agony. But the silence maddened his master even more than the semi-resistance of his cries had done, and he set upon the poor beast with his feet and kicked him brutally and fiercely, and struck him with the butt end of the whip, and hit him with his clenched fists, and finally spat upon him ; till at last in kicking at the dog he missed and, overbalancing himself, fell to the ground.

He lay still a minute, until Dallas thought he was hurt and started to go to his assistance.

But he was not hurt. He sat up on the ground, and then rose to his feet and looked about him in a dazed, bewildered manner, and stood with his hand pressed to his forehead.

Next he looked at the dog whom he had so cruelly beaten, and the sight affected him until a look of intense pain came on his face. He moved towards the dog and his foot kicked against the heavy whip. He seized it and snapped it across his knee and hurled the pieces from him, and then threw himself headlong by the side of the dog, and, unfastening the rope with trembling fingers, he put his arm round the animal's neck and kissed it and caressed it with many gestures and words of affection.

Hugh Dallas turned away from the spot distressed, pained and frightened at what he had seen, and at the thoughts which forced themselves upon him as the

result, and continued his walk with slow, heavy steps in the direction of the house.

"My God, is he mad?" he said to himself in a whisper under his breath, and he began to realize then what the marriage might mean for Margery.

"Dear me, Mr. Dallas, have you seen a ghost?"

Hugh Dallas looked up, and found Nan holding out her hand to him, and looking at him with heightened color.

"No, Miss Nan, I am not of the ghost-seeing tribe," he answered very gravely, as he took her hand. "But I have seen something more alarming than a ghost."

"What is that?" she asked. "Nothing is the matter I hope?" her face grave instantly with sweet solicitude.

"No, no," he answered, and forced himself to smile. He had no intention to tell her what he had really seen. "But it was a terrible tragedy. Buzzing noisily in the toils of a spider's web was a large fly, and the spider came down like a wolf on the fold and bent on murder, when the murderer himself was caught in the beak of avenging justice—in the shape of a bird, who gobbled the spider, broke the web, and set the innocent fly free."

The flippancy of his answer jarred harshly on him, but he wanted to avoid questions.

"Are you never serious, Mr. Dallas?" asked Nan reproachfully.

"Just now I am, I assure you," he replied, with the same flippancy. "Serious enough for three men, to say nothing of the dog."

Nan turned away petulantly, and Dallas walked

quickly toward the house with her, anxious to get out of sight lest Godfrey should see him.

When they had gone a few paces, Nan looked at him gravely and said :

"I suppose you think you are very cleverly hiding under that quite unnatural flippancy the fact that you have really had some kind of shock. But you are not doing anything of the kind. I think it best to tell you that, lest you might be tempted to make the same mistake with other people. It doesn't impose upon me one bit. For the moment your manner annoyed me, but—I am sorry—you seem in great trouble."

She hesitated over the last sentence.

"You are very good, Miss Nan. I have had an experience which has upset me. It is no trouble of my own exactly ; but I thank you for what you say. I cannot tell you what it is—at least not now."

Nan looked searchingly at him, and he thought she turned anxious.

"Do you mean it is something affecting any of us ? "

"It does not affect you directly, Miss Nan," he replied, evading the question. That was little use with Nan, however.

"I did not mean myself," she answered ; "I meant and said any of us. Shall I mention all our names ? " And her eyelids drooped as if in subdued mischief.

"I am afraid I must say, as they do in the House of Commons, that I should like notice of that question," he answered. "By which I mean I will think over my experience before I speak of it—even to my ally," recalling an old conversation.

"I don't think we are allies now," she said, shrug-

ging her shoulders slightly, "unless it be such an alliance as that between Martin Chuzzlewit and Mark Tapley, where Martin did just what he pleased, and Mark wasn't allowed to know or say anything," retorted the girl.

"Ah," said Dallas, "they were very much attached to one another—and everything came right in the end, you remember."

"Yes, but not until Martin had had that fever, and found out he couldn't do without Mark," retorted Nan, thinking more of the retort than of how the meaning could be applied to themselves.

"Such a reward would not be dearly earned, even if it meant a fever," answered Dallas; and then the girl blushed and was silent.

But the silence lasted only a minute, for a train of thought was set up which her companion did not follow. She looked up at him with an expression in her eyes which he could not read.

"I think I know whom that experience of yours concerns," she said.

"Whom?"

"Mrs. Rudyer," and the corners of her mouth showed the symptoms of a smile.

"Mrs. Rudyer?" he exclaimed.

"Yes. You know, of course, that she arrived yesterday, and you have come to speak to her about it, whatever it is. I'll go and tell her you are here," and she ran into the house and left him, paying no heed to his call to her not to go.

He turned on his heel, and what he thought about Mrs. Rudyer is best left unmentioned. He remem-

bered that Nan had thought he had been over on the preceding Saturday to see the widow, and he presumed that she was now of opinion that he had come over again for the same purpose.

And this happened just, as he told himself, they were getting on so pleasantly. One resolution he framed hastily as the result of his former experiences with her, and the misunderstandings that had resulted. He made a vow that no consideration on earth should induce him to be alone in Mrs. Rudyer's company.

His meditations were cut short, however, by the appearance of Godfrey, who came up the drive, looking painfully haggard and ill, and carrying his dog in his arms.

He stopped with some surprise and disquiet when he saw Dallas approaching him.

"Is the dog hurt?" asked Dallas.

"Yes; I'm afraid rather badly. Poor Gyp!" This to the dog.

"How did it happen?"

"I—hardly know. I'm afraid I'm rather to blame. I have had to beat him this afternoon, he was very disobedient. He's very trying at times, and I'm afraid I hit him once or twice rather harder than I intended. But—he's got hurt in—in some way since."

He hesitated as he said this, and was confused.

"Will you let me examine him? I know something of the treatment of dogs," said Dallas, bending over him. "Why, he has been stoned, or kicked, or struck with some heavy weapon. See here," and he pointed to a wound where the dog's skin had been kicked away. It was bleeding.

"Yes, I saw some places like that. Poor Gyp," and the faithful beast licked his hand as he spoke.

"He knows who is kind to him," said Dallas. "How do you think he can have been hurt like this?" he asked.

"I don't know—I don't know at all. Some coward who has a spite against him. He barks at some of the villagers sometimes. If I knew, I would make him smart. I didn't know—I thought—at least, it seemed to me at first that he might have had a fall somewhere, or something had fallen on him. Do you think that possible?"

"It might be just possible," answered Dallas. "I suppose you couldn't have struck him harder than you intended, and so have caused the wound?"

"If I had I should have said so, and not have spoken as though it were the work of somebody else," answered Godfrey, reddening and speaking indignantly to hide his dislike of the question. But he over-acted the part. "I'll take him round to the stables. Wigley will see to him."

"Do; it's the least that can be done," answered Dallas, disgusted at the other's conduct.

"He's ashamed of it, that's very clear," he said as he watched Godfrey walk away. "But what a lie he told. Is it a good or a bad sign that he should be so ashamed that he can lie like that? I'm afraid it's a bad one," and he shook his head. "He knows to what lengths his paroxysm carried him, and it's his cunning now in his attempt to hide it. Phew! this puts a nice light on the whole complication, and no mistake." Then, as if his thoughts had taken a species of grim

jocosity, he added, "Wish he'd cut the knot by falling in love with the widow. By the way, I sha'n't get a chance of saying a word about that mysterious Esther Southerst now. I think I'd better keep a still tongue in my head while he's in such a frame of mind as he is to-day."

With that he turned and went into the house, and finding Margery and the captain, explained that being in the district he had come the rest of the way to make a formal afternoon call.

Then Mrs. Rudyer came down-stairs. She had been most busily employed in completing her toilet. She looked bewitchingly pretty in her heavy mourning, and the excitement and pleasure of seeing Dallas had given her a bright color.

He expressed his condolence and sympathy in those sounding sentences of which he had an endless stock always at immediate command, and she received them with as much becoming solemnity and outward grief as was possible, when her heart was bounding with a secret joy that she was free to think of him, and him only; and her brain was busy scheming how to get him alone with her that day.

She failed to do this, and it was with something like consternation, which she took no pains to conceal, that she saw him rise, when he had been in the house about an hour, and declare that he must go to catch a certain train. All she could do was to let him understand as much as possible from the lingering pressure of the hand—so long that he thought the others would observe it—with which she bade him good-by. It vexed him, for he was certain that Nan's dark eyes had noticed everything.

CHAPTER XXI.

"My Dear Hugh,—I wish you could manage to stay with me from Saturday till the wedding is over on Tuesday. I hear you were at the Manor House this afternoon. If I had had an idea of this, I would have seen you to urge you to this in person. Try.—Yours ever, "Alan Ramsay."

"Dear Mr. Dallas, I would say 'my dear Hugh,' but you would probably tell me I was not discreet. I did so want to get a word with you when you were here this evening. I am pining for a chat. I must scold you for not coming up to London when I was in trouble and alone. I think it *so* unkind—*so* unlike you! You are right to be cautious; but there is no need for so much caution *now*. However, I trust you so entirely that I cannot but agree with all you do. Of course you will be here this week end. It will be *such* a comfort to me to have you near me. What an ill-fated marriage this promises to be! Everything seems so ominous and mournful. Poor Margery! Ah, what is marriage without love? I am afraid for her future. I know how blank it may be. Poor Margery! I hope dear Nan's will be happier. He seems a very amiable fellow, though not, of course, brilliant. But she is such a clever girl, so sharp and observant, and seemingly so fond of him, that she will

be able to manage him. I think you have seen Mr. Momerie, haven't you? Is she not a lucky girl to find some one so rich and so fond of her? Do come on Saturday. Come as early as possible. Au revoir.

"BEATRICE."

It would have been difficult for Dallas, keen as he was at self-analysis, to have described his feelings as he tossed the last letter down on the desk in front of him, and leant back in his chair, eyeing it in grim and gloomy disdain.

"How I am getting to hate that woman!" he murmured to himself. "I'm getting to that stage that I look on her as the quintessence of everything that's tawdry and veneered and cheap. Yet I suppose I'm wrong. There must be something genuine about her of some kind. There's that in most of us; but I'll be hanged if I can take even a moderately unpleasant view of her conduct. All this about 'poor Margery' is just intended as a back-handed reflection about herself and her marriage, in which, by some outlandish female logic, she believes she was a victim. Then 'I hope dear Nan's will be happier.' That's jealousy. At least I hope it is. I suppose I may as well own it now as later on." This was spoken as if it were an aside to himself, and he smiled then as if explaining to himself what he really did mean. "I mean, that is, that I hope there's reason on Miss Nan's part. And I should like to be able to feel quite clear that there's nothing but jealous spite at the bottom. Pshaw! I won't think about it any more."

He folded the letter up and put it in his pocket, and,

drawing some paper from the case, finished a little article which he had been engaged upon that afternoon when the two letters had been brought to him.

His thoughts, however, were too distracted for him to be able to concentrate them, and, having scrambled through the writing, he gave a sigh of relief when he laid down the pen.

"That'll have to do," he said. "Now for a line to Alan to tell him I'll do what he wants, and then I'll have a think about that scene which I overlooked yesterday. I must do something at once to find that woman."

He wrote a hasty note and was in the act of closing it, when his door was opened and Alan Ramsay himself was announced.

"You are surprised at seeing me, Hugh," said Alan, after they had shaken hands. "You'll be more when I tell what has happened."

"I can partly guess it," answered Dallas, jumping to a most hasty conclusion. "Something has happened to Godfrey Drury to cause the postponement of the marriage."

"Who has told you? Is the news in your paper?" asked Alan, in great astonishment.

"No. It is only a guess of mine."

"Well, it's made the feathers fly, first barrel. He's had a fall somewhere and somehow, and he's lying between life and death; at least, so that young Guy says. He came rushing over with the news; and to keep myself out of mischief, I came bowling over to you. If I could go near the dear old captain some of 'em would have been sure to *see* how devilish glad I

was to hear the news. And yet I feel all the time a miserable hound for being glad. But I can't help it. I'm sorry for the poor chap, of course, but 'tisn't in me to say I'm sorry the match is off for a time. Anyway, I've made a bolt of it. But what on earth made you guess it?"

"A fall, you say? Where?"

"I don't know. Guy didn't say."

"How was he found?"

"I don't know. Oh, yes, I do. He managed to crawl somewhere or other and give an alarm. I'm not sure he didn't crawl all the way home. But I didn't stop to ask. But what are you looking so grave and serious about. It isn't our fault, is it, that a fellow should go and tumble down?"

"It's not your fault, Alan; but I'm not so sure that it isn't mine," answered Dallas.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"That I'm by no means convinced that it was a fall that caused this. I am more than half disposed to believe, moreover, that I know the person by whom or through whom it was done."

Alan Ramsay gazed at his friend in astonishment.

"Who was it?"

"Do you remember that letter you received?"

"I'm not likely to forget it. But—"

"It might have pointed to something of the kind."

"Don't, Hugh. Don't go suggesting that one may have been a party to anything of the kind by keeping silent about that. By Jove!" he exclaimed, with sudden spirit, "if I thought there was anything of that kind at the back of that letter, I'd have it traced out.

And if you really think that there's been foul play in this matter, I won't rest till I've tracked the scoundrels down. By Gad, the very idea makes my blood boil. It's one thing to believe in a sort of gipsy's warning; but it's another to find one's own advantage in somebody else's villainy. Why do you think this?"

"Did you ever hear of a woman called Esther Southerst, Alan?" asked Dallas, answering his question with another.

"Esther Southerst? No, who's she?"

"Do you remember of an attempted suicide at Barrleigh of a woman of that name four years ago?"

"No. I was away a lot, then. Up at Oxford and spent the Long in Germany. Why?"

"That's the woman who wrote you that letter, or caused it to be written. And it's she—always a woman, you see—who's at the bottom of this mischief now."

"I daresay you're right. You don't generally speak in that deliberate fashion without knowing what you say. But how do you know this? Because it's a devil of a charge to bring against any one. Judging by what young Guy says, it's attempted murder."

"Aye; but Godfrey says he has only had a fall, don't you see?" returned Dallas.

"I wish you'd out with what you know, Hugh. I'm hanged if I understand what you're driving into at present."

"Morally, I'm certain; but I've very little proof. Some one, who I have reason to think is Esther Southerst herself, has written to me, to you, and to Miss Allingham, and to some one else—I can't say whom—about this marriage. To me she hinted it was a crime,

and that as a public man—a common mistake—I was bound to seek to prevent the marriage; to you she said the marriage would never take place; Miss Allingham she charged with intending to marry young Drury for money, while hiding the fact of her love for you, and the marriage was spoken of as a sin. In all the letters the writer has shown a considerable acquaintance with our movements, especially mine; and you will see that while two of the letters prove the great antipathy to the marriage, that to you shows a confident determination to be able to prevent it. In later letters I am upbraided for having done nothing to stop it, and am warned that the consequences will be on my head. That was why I guessed the news you brought to-day. I take this to be the consequences."

"And knowing all this, you have done nothing, Hugh?" asked Alan.

"I have done nothing. What could I do?" replied Dallas, looking up.

"Couldn't you see this woman—what is her name—Southerst?"

"How could I find her? I asked her to communicate with me. That is, I put a notice in the paper, which she saw. But she refused to come. You know the position of things at the Manor House about this marriage. What would have been my outlook if I had tried to do anything on the strength of one or two anonymous letters?"

"Yes, I understand that," said Alan. "But where does she write from?"

"Each time and each letter from different places."

"Yet you say you have been uncomfortable?"

"I do; I've an uneasy feeling that I ought to have done something; and yet I've answered my own thoughts just as I've answered yours; and I see no reason to blame myself—save one."

"What's that?"

"A certain line of investigation I might perhaps have taken and didn't. But I hate acting on such a flimsy ground as an anonymous letter. In fact, I can't do it. But now, of course, it's different."

"If this was no fall, you mean?"

"Yes. We must find that woman, and hear what she has to say. It is from her we must get the reason why young Drury is content to call this accident a fall. That's where these two threads join," said Dallas.

"If you could not do it before, how will you do it now?"

"Probably the writer will be over-confident after this business. I shouldn't be surprised if I were to hear from her."

"Well, I hope she won't give much trouble, for I suppose your hands will be very full. I forgot, in the excitement of the other matter, I ought to have congratulated you—although I suppose it is scarcely made public yet. I understood that, of course. But you kept the whole thing awfully close. It came like a thunder-clap to me. But she's a jolly, cheerful little soul."

"What on earth are you driving at, Alan?" asked Hugh Dallas.

"Oh, ah, of course. You don't know, do you?"

laughed Alan. "Oh, no; you're an innocent. You might have told me, old man."

"Probably I should have done if I myself had only known. But just tell me in plain language what it is that you think you ought to congratulate me about. Seriously," he said, seeing that Alan was going to chaff him again.

"Why, what should it be but about the tacit renewal of your old engagement to the pretty widow? Don told me, and he had it from Guy, who took it from Nan, who received it from Margery, to whom it was imparted by the widow herself. At least, so I trace it."

"This is getting interesting," said Dallas, with a grim kind of smile. "Just let's have that again. You have heard that Mrs. Rudyer has been good enough to say that an old engagement between us has been tacitly renewed. Is that it?"

"That's about the size of it, as I understand," returned Alan Ramsay, smiling. "I didn't even know you'd been engaged to her once, let alone twice."

"She's a clever little woman," said Dallas crisply.

"She is that, and a bright little thing, too. I like her."

"And daring, too—devilish daring."

"Yes, I should think she's plucky enough," said Alan, puzzled by his friend's manner.

"Man, but she's an awful liar," exclaimed Dallas, with such emphasis that Alan started.

"Hugh!"

"She is. I'm no more engaged to marry her than I am to marry you."

"But have you never been engaged to her then?"

"That's an old matter, and as dead as a bit of old slag. She knows it, too, well enough."

"Well, but—"

"What is she driving at, you mean? That's nothing to me. You can take it from me that—But wait a minute."

He stopped suddenly, and, pushing his chair back vigorously, took two or three hasty turns up and down the room. Then he sat down again and laughed, and resumed in his natural manner:

"I'm sorry I spoke like that. I was excited."

His thoughts had flown rapidly to the probable effects of the news on Nan, and this had moved him so much.

"I think there must be a mistake. The news must have grown on its way to you. Those lads may have done it. I can't think that Mrs. Rudyer would say this. I don't think it. At any rate, you may take it from me that there is no foundation whatever for anything of the kind—none whatever," he repeated.

"Premature?" asked Alan, raising his eyebrows.

"No. Impossible," returned Dallas firmly.

"Then I should think Don or Guy have mixed things up, or the girls have. Because one of them said they weren't a bit surprised at the news. I think it was Nan."

Hugh Dallas colored with vexation at hearing this.

"Don't blush, old man, you're too old for that," said Alan, with a light laugh.

And the elder man found the remark exceedingly unpalatable, but handled it skilfully.

"My color is for the lady's sake, not my own. I am very sorry she should be placed in so awkward a position. But I shall be glad if you'll contradict the thing."

"All right; I'll tell Don, and it'll soon travel back well garnished. It's rather a baddish how-d'ye-do for the widow. Sorry for her, and sorry for you as well, Hugh. I fancy she'd make a fellow a good wife."

"Thanks, I always was unlucky," and Dallas laughed irritably.

He was annoyed—utterly without reason or common sense; but nevertheless distinctly annoyed that Alan should be so completely blind to the other possibilities as to be able to suggest such a match seriously.

This feeling of annoyance was the chief effect left upon his mind at the close of the day, when Alan had gone home, and Dallas sat in his own room thinking over the conversation. It was supremely irritating and galling that such a rumor should ever have been started about him. Still, it could all be explained away. But that Alan should have thought it a natural thing, and should not have had any other possibility in his thoughts, seemed to reveal to him, more than anything had done, what a—what a fool he was likely to be for his pains.

Alan's indifference was worse even than that little sentence about Nan herself having said she "was not surprised." She might say that, and not mean it, he thought; but Alan had meant what he said as a genuine expression of friendly feeling.

And neither Alan's troubles, nor the mystery about

Esther Southerst, had much of Dallas's attention during that evening ; for he was busy in web spinning, and wondering how Mrs. Rudyer could have had the "nerve" to start such a rumor, and how he would ever summon up courage enough to go over any more to the Manor House.

And what sort of a reception would he get from Nan? he asked himself. It interested him especially to try and answer this question in imagination, though most of his thought pictures made the reception unfavorable.

The next morning, however, his attention went back with a bound to Esther Southerst.

There was a letter from her :

"You see the consequences of your doing nothing. What has happened to G. D. is my work. You had better act while there is time. One Who Knows.

He thought a moment, and then rang his bell.

"Send Mr. Pickering to me."

This was a young, energetic, clever, shrewd reporter who had been under Hugh Dallas some years.

"Pickering, I have a private matter of great urgency I want looked into. It is not a matter for the paper ; but it will give you a chance of doing what American reporters like. I have had one or two letters from an anonymous correspondent, and I want to trace the writer. I have reason to believe that it is a woman," and he said how the report of the attempted suicide had described her and gave her name. "She was yesterday at Seacove, or near there, and posted a letter

to me from there. Here is the envelope. I want that woman traced. Do you think you can do it? I would go myself, but I am tied here."

"Is there any reason why she should keep out of the way?" asked the young fellow. "And does she live at this place?"

"I don't know where she lives: but any questions you ask there must be put with great caution. I know of no reason why she should hide; but she does hide, because I asked her in a notice to communicate, and she would not, though she saw the notice."

"I think I can find her at such a place as Seacove. At any rate, I can try. I'll go by the first train."

"And say nothing, Pickering."

"Not a word," he replied, as he left the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

Saturday morning brought a letter from Captain Drury, short and to the point, asking Hugh Dallas not to put off his visit on account of Godfrey's accident.

"We shall be glad to see you, and, moreover, glad to congratulate you."

"Confound that woman," was Dallas's underbreath comment when he read the last line. "It's the most wretched mess she could have put me into. It'll be such an awkward business for her if I accuse her of trying to inveigle me into an engagement before even the mould has settled down on her husband's coffin. And there, she's so preposterously pretty and artless that no one will think she could have done it purposely; and yet, if she's supposed to have made a mistake, naturally enough everybody will jump to the conclusion that I've said enough to her to lead her to make it. And it's so infernally ridiculous."

Here he burst into a laugh, despite his vexation.

"What a fool I shall feel when I get over there. But I must face it. And then, hang it, there's the old engagement to give it color. She's an artful mixture of recklessness and fooling, and no mistake. I shouldn't care so much if it weren't for the ridicule of the thing. By the way, I must put that notice in. Sorry Pickering could do nothing."

The reporter had failed to find any trace of Esther Southerst, and Dallas had accordingly determined to try and draw his correspondent again with a notice to the effect that the matter was to be carried forward, but some necessary information must be forthcoming, and "One Who knows" must communicate.

During the journey to Seacove Hugh Dallas was very thoughtful, trying to decide the best plan to adopt in regard to what Mrs. Rudyer had apparently said about him, and he decided that the frankest as well as the wisest course would be to see Mrs. Rudyer herself, if possible, before he saw any of the others, and leave it for her to put things right. But matters did not go all as he wished, for the first persons he saw as the train drew up at the platform was the captain, steadily scanning the carriages, while Nan was by his side clasping his arm tightly.

"Pity Mrs. Rudyer isn't here as well," muttered Dallas grimly. "Would have given a finish to things."

He tried to be perfectly natural in his greeting ; but he could not help a feeling of uneasiness and nervousness, and found himself waiting with a most disconcerting apprehension for the subject to be introduced.

"How is Mr. Godfrey ? " asked Hugh, after they had shaken hands, Nan showing considerable coldness, and being distant in her manner.

"Much better—wonderfully better, so far as the actual hurt is concerned ; but the shock has unsettled him grievously, grievously," answered the captain.

"How did it happen ? "

"Well, we are not quite clear. Of course one can

understand how Godfrey might be confused in his recollection. All he seems to remember is that he was walking along the cliff; but whether he tripped, or overbalanced, or whatever the cause may have been, he doesn't recollect at all. He only remembers coming to himself afterwards, and managing to crawl till he got assistance."

"What time was it? How came he to be at the place?"

As Dallas asked this, he caught a look—swift, keen, and inquiring—which flashed out from Nan's eyes. She was walking on the other side of the captain, and she bent a little forward.

"He was only walking, I presume," answered the captain. "Poor Godfrey! He is so upset by the shock that he seems dazed yet, and scarce knows what he says, and certainly has no clear recollection of what happened."

The captain sighed heavily, for this part of his son's illness distressed and alarmed him most.

"Does he know I am coming over?"

"Yes, and he wishes to see you." And again Nan leant forward and looked at Dallas. But the captain did not observe this, and continued, laughing, "I suppose he wants to see you for the same reason as we do; eh, Nan?" And he turned to the girl and chuckled.

"Here it comes," thought Dallas, and made haste to fend it off.

"I shall be glad to see him. I'm delighted to hear that he is better. Of course the shock is certain to be severe."

"See how he turns it off, Nan, eh?" laughed Captain Drury. "Yet he's not the man to be ashamed of what anybody might consider an honor. Mr. Dallas, I hope you will be happy; I do with all my heart."

And the captain held out his hand, causing Nan, who was at his right, to loosen her clasp of his arm.

"Thank you; but—I think there—"

"Yes, yes, we know all about it; don't we, Nan? You're quite right, both of you, considering all past matters. Of course nothing can be said publicly. But I hope we're friends; eh, Nan? I want certainly to think of you as one of my best friends; and as for Mrs. Rudyer, why, isn't she Madge's oldest school friend? Now, Nan, what do you say?"

"Mr. Dallas knows my opinion of Mrs. Rudyer; he has taken care to get that beforehand," answered Nan, with calm, smiling sarcasm. "Two people so thoroughly suited ought to be happy."

"I think I can understand your good wishes—both of you," answered Dallas, looking pointedly at Nan, who blushed very slightly and turned away. "I heard something of this from Alan, who was over in Middlingham in the week. But there has been some little misapprehension, and you must not give me your congratulations."

His manner was very stiff and nervous, and, as he felt, altogether unsatisfactory. But he could not bring himself to put Mrs. Rudyer's conduct in the exceedingly unpleasant light in which it must appear if the truth were told. He would see her first, whatever the consequences to himself.

His two hearers noticed his manner, and interpreted it quite differently.

"All right, all right, my lad, I understand," said the captain knowingly. "Premature, eh? Too soon after poor Mr. Rudyer's death. Yes, yes, I understand; let it be as you like."

Nan said nothing; but when Dallas glanced, as he did almost eagerly, in her direction, he noticed her lip curl as if she were less puzzled than indifferent or contemptuous. And it made him very uncomfortable. To make matters worse, they met the widow in the grounds, looking bewitchingly pretty and innocent, and with a warm light brightening her eyes at sight of Dallas. She was evidently prepared for the struggle, for as soon as she caught sight of the three she hastened to them, and holding out both her hands, went up to Dallas.

"Ah, Hugh, I am glad you are come. I am so sorry I could not get to the station."

And the expression in her eyes changed, as she looked right into his, as if to challenge him to disavow the relationship she had invented.

"How do you do, Mrs. Rudyer?" he answered, calmly and rather sternly, while he held out only one hand.

"Cautious Hugh," she said, unabashed. "But you are right. I am always wrong when I trust my impetuous feelings, captain," she cried, with a laugh and a blush, turning to Captain Drury. "And then I get scolded. I am sorry," she said, turning again to Dallas, and speaking less excitedly.

"I must run in to Godfrey," said the captain.

"But I know you'll excuse me," he added, laughing slyly. "Come along, Nan."

"Thanks; you are very good, captain. Yes, I have something I want to say to Mrs. Rudyer."

The two turned back, Nan going with the captain without taking the slightest notice of them.

Mrs. Rudyer was just a little pale, and she bit her lip and wrinkled her forehead thoughtfully as she waited for what she knew was to be a struggle. Finding Hugh was silent longer than she expected, she determined to strike the first blow.

"Well, Hugh, have you nothing kind to say to me now we are alone? Have I not managed splendidly to smooth matters like this?"

"What does all this tomfoolery mean?" asked Dallas in reply, speaking very sternly.

"Tomfoolery, Hugh. What an extraordinary term, dear!"

"It's used to describe an extraordinary act. But we have no need to play with words. Will you please tell me what you have told the people here about me?"

"I have told them what a good fellow you are," replied the widow with a light laugh, "and always were; and how clever you are in your work; and what beautiful articles—"

"Thank you," interrupted Dallas. "I have not asked that. What have you said that leads them to couple my name with yours, and to offer me congratulations?"

"Do they do that?" she asked, with the smile of a pleased child.

Dallas coughed, and turned away.

"When Alan Ramsay came over to Middlingham to me during the week, he said that you had told the people here that you and I were engaged to be married. Is that so?"

"You know well enough it was, Hugh," she replied, purposely misunderstanding him, and opening her large eyes reproachfully at him.

"He said that you have led them to think we *are* engaged now. Have you done that?"

"People do jump to conclusions so," she laughed.

"I wish you would be serious, Mrs. Rudyer. This is a very grave matter to me."

"You look it." She glanced up merrily at him, and then added, "Dear old serious Hugh! Just like you used to look. Ah, the happy old days!" and she sighed.

"I want you to be good enough to think of the present. The past is dead—"

"Not to me, Hugh; and it never, never will be."

He began to think he was getting the worst of it.

"Will you now tell me, if you please, what you have said to these people to make them think we are engaged?"

"I have told them how much I admire you; and I think I have told Margery more than that; how sweet the old days used to be to us both; and how an unfortunate misunderstanding parted us; and how doubly dear is the joy of reconciliation. Ah, Hugh!" she cried, with sudden feeling, clinging to his arm, and looking up lovingly into his face, "don't be cross with me. My heart was so full, I couldn't help letting others see what I felt."

"You have told them that we are reconciled in the sense of being re-engaged, have you?" he asked, removing her hands from his arm.

"I have told them the greatest grief of my life was when you and I were parted," she said, in low, trembling tones, while tears filled her eyes. "And that is true, as true as—as my feeling for you."

The sight of her tears touched him, despite his anger. She knew this.

"Do you not see that you have placed yourself in a very false position? Surely you do." He spoke very kindly. "You have led these people to think that we are engaged."

"Not engaged," she said, her lips trembling.

"Well, reconciled with a view to an engagement," he corrected.

"Well?" She said this after a pause, and turned to look at him through her gathered tears, as if astonished that he should be surprised at her having done so.

He was going to speak again, when the full meaning of her look flashed upon him, and startled him into silence.

"Are we not reconciled?" she asked, in low, trembling accents.

"We are reconciled," he answered; and the realization of her meaning hardened him, and made his manner cold and stern. "But only as acquaintances. We are not even friends. We have met by chance under the roof of mutual friends, and courtesy has made it impossible for us to be strangers. That is all."

"Don't speak so coldly," she answered, shuddering,

her tears now flowing freely, and her emotion seeming to pass suddenly beyond her control. "Your words are like biting acid on a wound. For heaven's sake, have some pity, and remember I have loved you all my life. You are all that is dear to me in the world. Take me to your heart, Hugh. Try, try to warm my life."

She clung to him again.

"There must be an end to this," he said, trying to remove her hands from him, but in vain.

"No, no; there can be no end to my love but the end of my life. No, Hugh, Hugh, you shall not put me away from you. You shall not," and she bent forward and kissed his hand.

"Mrs. Rudyer, you forget yourself—" he began.

"No, no, I do not. I care nothing for myself—nothing. I can forget everything except that I love you. I cannot live without you. I swear I cannot. I will kill myself if you put me away now. I am yours, body, soul, and spirit. I care for nothing else, my darling, my darling." Then she burst into a fit of hysterical weeping and seemed about to fall.

Dallas put out his arm to save her, and she nestled close to him at once, and laid her face on his heart.

"Ah, that is heaven!" and she smiled at him and added, "I knew you could not be hard to me for long. My darling!"

At that moment, chancing to glance round him, Dallas was surprised and annoyed to find that the spot where they stood, though some distance from the house, was yet in full view of some of the upper windows; and he thought he could see some one looking

in their direction. His fancy made him take this to be Nan, and the thought hardened him infinitely against the woman at his side, and put an end to the momentary irresolution which had seized him as to the best means of dealing with her.

The whole thought had barely occupied an instant of time and did not suffice to make the pause apparent.

With a quick movement he put her away from him.

"This farce must end," he said, very sternly and angrily. "You have always had your feelings under excellent control, I know; but you will please to understand that this display is quite superfluous. You know perfectly well that I have not only never given you the slightest occasion to believe that whatever I was mad enough to feel for you once survives now, but that I have made it distinct and plain to you that the opposite was the case. You will then be good enough to undeceive these people. You may choose your own way to do this, provided it be done thoroughly and at once. Do you hear?"

He asked the last question, finding she made no reply.

She stood a little apart from him with her head bent and her face hidden. Without turning she asked:

"Is this the answer to the offer of my love, Hugh?"

"It is my reply to your late demonstration," he said.

Another pause followed, in which she seemed to be fighting down her emotions. Then she turned and looked at him; and all the signs of her tears had gone, while her cheeks burned with color and her eyes glowed with a bright lustre.

"You wish me to tell these people that we are not engaged—yet?" she asked.

"You will tell them what you please, so long as you make it plain that our relations are—what they are."

"I have done that," she answered, "and yet you are not satisfied. They have only drawn the inference from my words which you wished me to draw from your conduct," her voice here was just a trifle unsteady.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"That you have wished me to understand that our recomciliation is but a step to our re-engagement, Hugh. I interpreted it so; and I could not do otherwise."

"Then the sooner you do so now the better," he said harshly.

"I cannot do that; I will not do it. I will not give you up. I have told these people no more than the truth."

"Do you mean that you regard me—" he began.

"I mean that I hold you to be my affianced husband, and no power on this earth shall ever keep you from me. You were mine years ago, and you are mine now. I am reckless—utterly reckless. All the world may see my feelings for you as all may know we were once plighted lovers. You don't seem to have counted the cost of trying to thrust aside a desperate woman mad with love of you. You shall see what it means."

"I think I see something of what it means now in this."

"You may. I care not. I have only done here what I will do always and everywhere—asserted my claim. While the man whom I married while loving

you was alive, I kept from you as long as I could; but my truth was getting strained and wearing thin at the close. We met; and you thought to be cold and prudent and common-sense. But it could not be that with us. You thought to part us by using my husband; but what you did only brought us closer together. You killed him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that in this practical, prosaic, dull, propriety age, you are bound to me, first by love and now by death." She laughed as she said this. "You said to him your only wish was never to see me again. He told me, and when I heard it, the words drove me mad with jealous hate of him for having come between us, and I told him all—everything that had ever passed between us. Why say more? Within a few hours he was dead. Now you know how he came to die suddenly. If you had come when I wired and wrote to you, you would have learnt it all then. No, I didn't kill him, if that's what you mean by that look. He died at peace with me; and told me he had long known he had not had my love. He had been acting a part just as I had; but with what people would call a better motive, I suppose. Now you see one reason why I hold you bound to me so closely that I will not give you up."

"I told Mr. Rudyer the truth," said Dallas coldly.

"Yes, I know, because you are a man of honor, and could say nothing else—then. Now, it is all changed. Well, you would not come to me, so I came to you. I thought—shall I tell you what I thought? Do you remember your promise not to flirt with that

girl here? Ah, then you will understand why, when I found you avoided me, I took measures to check any mistaken ideas that you were free. I thought you meant by our reconciliation that we should be re-engaged as soon as Mrs. Grundy would permit, and I said so. You like frankness, I know, from the old time, and so I have been frank."

"Yes, you have been frank enough. I will be equally plain with you. Since you will not tell these people that the real relations between us are those of acquaintances, one of whom is dismayed at the other's want of common decency, I will do so," said Dallas, with hard, direct bluntness.

The widow looked in his face for an instant, and then burst into laughter.

"What a child you are, Hugh, after all. Do you think for a moment that they will believe you against all that I have said—drop, drop, drop, day after day; and all the proofs of your love I have managed to give. You are no match for a woman, my dear, in this matter when her cunning is prompted by her infinite love. For I do love you, Hugh—never forget that; all I do is for that. But just think over all the times we have been together; all of which these people—including both the girls, you know—have observed. Why, take to-day, for instance. What will they think of this long confidential interview? What of my greeting of you? I have planned all this; and I am quite prepared to go on with it. Suppose you were now to say it was all a mistake, that I had been planning to catch you in the toils like a scheming widow,"—she laughed again at this—"do you think you would have a

chance of being believed against my acting, backed by the remembrance of our old engagement, and all the little innocent things that have fitted in like a child's word puzzle to spell compromising? More than that; supposing you were half-believed, would it help to raise you in the opinion of the dear, old, honest, tender-hearted captain, of good, true Margery, or even of pretty, sharp-sighted Nan, to have it known that you had broken my heart, and done it heartlessly and at such a time?"

Hugh Dallas made no reply for a moment, but then shrugging his shoulders, he said:

"It is just such a scheme as you might make, but it has one fatal flaw—it won't wear. As it comes to be tried by time, it will fail in a dozen points. Meanwhile, I warn you, and as you will not tell the truth, I will; and shall do it at once."

With that he left her. But he was by no means so confident as his words implied. He knew the exact spot where the attack would tell—the effect upon Nan; and as he walked quickly to the house, he was full of misgivings. The girl was on the terrace alone when he reached there. She looked at him with calm indifference as he neared her, and then said:

"I think Godfrey would like to see you, Mr. Dallas. He asked for you more than an hour ago, soon after we got back from the station. Can you go to him?"

"Yes, thank you. I will go now," he said, startled to find how long the interview had lasted. "I should have gone before, but—"

But Nan turned away into the house with a murmured excuse, and without waiting to hear more.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I SEEM to fall in for some good things when I come over here," said Hugh Dallas to himself, in a sardonic undertone, as he went up to Godfrey's room. "What a situation for a man whose hatred of ridicule is as morbid and keen as mine. I suppose there'll be some more of this congratulation here."

He found Margery and the captain in the sick-room and the girl rose with a smile and shook hands, giving him to understand more by her manner than the few syllables she whispered, that she wished to congratulate him. He said nothing then, for his attention was mainly attracted to Godfrey Drury.

The cripple looked very white and ill and nervous. His eyes, larger by contrast with his thin, drawn face, were fastened upon Dallas the moment the latter entered the room, and followed every movement; and there was an expression in them which Dallas had never before noticed.

"I was sorry to hear of your accident," he said, going to the bedside and speaking in a low voice. "But Captain Drury tells me you are much better."

"I was not hurt much," answered Godfrey. "I'm getting better again fast." His voice was weak, and sounded a little hollow and nervous. "Sit down by the bedside, I want to talk to you. Can you spare time?" He looked anxious as he asked this.

"Why, of course. The whole day if you wish it," answered Dallas cheeringly. "I want to try and rouse you a bit. These things pull a fellow down a good deal. Now tell me, how did you manage to tumble over that bit of the cliff?"

"I don't remember; at least I suppose I tripped, or something," answered Godfrey uneasily, and then he changed the subject. "But I hear you have been tumbling, too."

"I?"

"Yes, falling in love," said Godfrey, with a smile.

Dallas's face grew stern, for he noticed that both Margery and the captain looked at him and smiled as well.

"That is a grave mistake which you are not alone in making," he answered, in such a tone that the rest were astonished. "We will not speak of it now, if you please."

A very awkward silence followed.

"I will leave you now that Mr. Dallas has come, dear," said Margery, bending over Godfrey.

"Yes, please. I want to speak to him. And you, father."

Dallas looked on in astonishment as the two left the room together, the captain taking a moment to whisper:

"Humor him, Mr. Dallas, if you can. It's upset him a good deal. Humor him if you can."

"Mr. Dallas, I want to say something to you—something I can't say to any one else here, yet the want of speaking about it is making me ill. I can trust you, can't I?"

"Certainly you may trust me freely," answered Dallas, returning to his chair by the bedside and trying to keep his surprise from showing in his face.

"Yes, I know. At any rate I must tell somebody. This was no fall. I was attacked and struck."

"Ah!" exclaimed Dallas; and then after a moment's pause, "by whom?"

"How can I tell?" said Godfrey, a red flush dying his drawn face, and his eyes fixed steadily on the other's face.

"I thought that was what you wanted to tell me," replied Dallas steadily, in a matter-of-fact tone.

The cripple raised himself with an effort and looked about the room suspiciously and then asked, in a low voice:

"There's no one here? Look outside the door."

"No, no; there's no one about."

"Look outside the door," said the other again impatiently, and, to satisfy him, Dallas did so.

"Lock it."

"What next?" thought Dallas, as he turned the key in the lock.

"Come close to me and listen."

"Had you not better wait until you are stronger? This excitement may do you harm."

"No," said the invalid sharply. "It's wanting to speak of it that keeps me ill. My dear father, God bless him, thinks I am suffering from shock caused by this; so I am, but not as he thinks." Then he stopped suddenly, and passed his long white fingers across his forehead, as if collecting his thoughts and determining how to begin.

Dallas watched him with real pity. It was evident enough that he was suffering great mental pain.

"They are trying to part me from Margery," he said, with an effort to overcome his nervousness that made his voice husky.

Hugh Dallas could not repress a slight start at this; partly of surprise at the words, and partly anxiety as to what would follow. He said nothing, waiting for the other to continue.

"Do you hear that? But they sha'n't do it, by God, they sha'n't," and in his excitement he dashed his fist on the coverlet.

"Who is doing this?"

"Do you remember my asking you about a woman whose name was mentioned in your office?"

"Do you mean Esther Southerst?"

"Yes," he cried vehemently. "Yes. Curse her!"

"Who is she?"

"Who is she?" echoed the cripple excitedly, his face crimsoning again and his brow lowering with heavy frowns. "She's a devil, a fiend, a beast, a hell-hag. How did you get her name? Don't, for God's sake, mislead me now. It was no pure chance that you mentioned it that day in your office. I was afraid of it at the time. I know it now, for she mentioned yours to me."

"Let me ask you again to put off this subject till you are stronger."

"My God, man, can't you see it's the suspense that's racking me and driving me mad? I have waited for your coming, saving up every atom of strength to speak to you about it. I shall never leave this room

alive or sane if we don't speak of it. Tell me everything you know. Everything."

"I will," answered Dallas; and then he spoke of the letters that had come to him, of his seeing the effect of the mention of the name upon Godfrey, of his reluctance to question him, of the turning up the report of the attempted suicide, and of the last futile attempt to trace the woman, in fact, of everything except the letters written to Margery and Alan.

"I have been placed in an exceedingly awkward position," he concluded. "These things have been brought to me, and I, as only a recent friend of you all, could not interfere. I could take no other course. I invited the writer to come to me that I might hear her story face to face and sift it, as I should do in any anonymous correspondence. The only other step that I feel now I ought to have taken was to have laid the letters before you. And that I had decided to do this week, if this had not happened. And now," he added, after a pause, "if you like to tell me what has passed before, and I can in any way help you, I will do all that lies in my power."

"The deep, artful she-devil," said the cripple, with an accent of concentrated rage, with a look of venomous fury which recalled to Dallas the expression he had seen on his face in that scene with the dog.

"What claim does she make upon you?" asked Dallas after a very long silence, in which the cripple had seemed buried in deep thought.

"I wish you had come to me at the first," said Godfrey. "We could have faced her, and perhaps have shamed her. She might have been afraid of you;

though, God knows, she's as reckless as she is bad. Will you see her?" he asked.

"Yes, if you wish it, and if I can find her."

"Oh, you can find her. She won't run away. She lives at a place called Mawlefen, near Strangford. Fen Cottages."

He blushed as he gave the address, and watched Dallas nervously and furtively as the latter wrote it down.

"Write and order her to come and see you at Middlingham on Monday. She'll do it when she knows I've given you the address."

Then another awkward silence followed, which Dallas broke.

"You had better tell me what sort of claim she makes on you."

"That I can't marry because I'm bound to her."

He jerked the words out as if defiantly.

"Bound! In what way?"

"She's a liar!" cried the cripple fiercely; "a foul liar. She'll tell you all her lying story. She's got it pat enough, but it's lies—lies from start to finish. She has no more claim on me than I have on you. She's a liar, a liar!" he repeated. "But I shall be easier when you've seen her. She'll be frightened of you."

"It would probably help me materially if you were to tell me something of what has passed between you."

"Don't ask me. I can't speak of it. I am ashamed, and I hate myself for it all when I think. Let it be enough that she met me here, and taunted me, and threatened me that I must break with Margery. My

God, I'd rather die, or kill her," and his eyes flashed ominously as he said this. "And when I refused, she set a great, hulking ruffian, some bully of hers, on me to maim me, vowing all the time that I should never live to marry another woman. Ah! Mr. Dallas," he cried suddenly, stretching out his hands, and clasping the other's arm, and speaking with a catch in his voice like the sob of an hysterical woman, "you can't think what this means to me. Margery's love is to me like light to one threatened with blindness, like air to a man who is buried alive, like Christ to some poor wretch whose faith is tottering. You will try and save me?" and he looked up so imploringly and piteously that Dallas was greatly moved.

"I will try," he answered, and he took Godfrey's cold, trembling hand and held it in his own warm, firm grasp. "And now try and get some rest, or this will do you infinite harm."

"I will try," said Godfrey faintly, as he lay back on his pillow and smiled at the man. "I am easier in mind now I have told you."

Dallas left him, the thought and sight of Godfrey's anguish and agony having driven away for the time all remembrance of his own worry.

At the foot of the stairs he found the captain, who had been pacing the hall with a kind of quarter-deck march. He was full of anxiety and grief, and looked so wistfully and inquiringly at Dallas that the younger man was full of sympathy for him.

"Is he any better?" asked the captain, trying to speak cheerfully.

"Yes, I think he will mend fast. We have had

quite a long talk together," replied Dallas, with prompt encouragement.

The captain looked at him steadily.

"Is it anything I can do for him? I should like to help him—if I can."

"I don't think there's anything at all," answered Dallas, regretting that he had not suggested taking the captain into confidence. "The shock has upset him, but I believe he will mend now."

"Then there's—but no," and he checked his eagerness with an effort. "I thought—I feared there was something; but Heaven forbid I should want to know the lad's secret if he does not want to tell me."

He looked with the same searching, wistful look into Dallas's face, as if inviting a confidence; but, when nothing was said, he turned away, saying he would go up again to Godfrey.

"I should have liked to tell the old captain," said Dallas to himself as he walked across to the library to write the letter at once which was to bring Esther Southerst to Middlingham on Monday.

He sat dallying for a moment with the pen, thinking partly how he should frame the letter, but chiefly over the strange story he had just heard.

"I was right, after all, in that half-guess I made the other day," he thought, "when I took the prosaic view of this woman's interference. But there must be something more behind. Why does he suppose she'll be afraid of me? I've sometimes had a notion that he himself was touched with a feeling of that sort. Poor devil! What a passion is that of his for Miss Margery. Or is it, I wonder, that his feelings are just wrought

up because he's afraid of losing her? But yet he was in earnest—if I ever saw a man in earnest—when he clutched hold of me in that hysterical way. But you never can tell exactly where mere love for a girl ends, and fear of losing her begins, with those self-absorbed, self-indulgent beggars. Anyway, I stand pledged to see him through a devilish awkward business, so here goes."

"To Esther Southerst, or 'One Who Knows.'

"Mr. Godfrey Drury has given me your address, and after a consultation between us, it has been decided that you shall come to my office—the office of the *Evening News*—at Middlingham, on Monday. You will please be there by two o'clock in the afternoon, punctually.

"Yours obediently,

"Hugh Dallas."

He read it over carefully.

"Yes, that'll do. Best to take the masterful line with that sort of woman straight from the outset. It ought be a striking interview. What a splendid column it would make for the *News*."

He smiled as he fastened the envelope, and addressed:

Esther Southerst,
Fen Cottages,
Mawlefen,
nr. Strangford.

"Neither 'Mrs.' nor 'Miss' with that young woman; but I'll endorse it 'Important.' Looks official. And now," he exclaimed, throwing himself back in his

chair, "what about my own bother? What's the best course to take with that exceedingly determined, not to say reckless, widow? I'm disposed to think," he went on, after a deeply thoughtful pause, "that my best weapon of defense will be the jester's motley: to turn the whole thing inside out, with the infernal absurdity of it all in full view. It is absurd—infernally absurd—and ridiculous; but there's a tremendous lot of truth in what she said, that if one takes it seriously, the sympathy is all likely to go to the woman. But if I could just laugh the whole thing out of countenance with a spice of mock heroics and somebody else to help me, of course. I'll go over and fetch old Alan, and tell him everything, and—wonder if we could get the two lads into it. That slangy youth Guy, who played my lady that salt water trick, would be a splendid ally. Egad, it's worth trying. It's rough on her, but she had her chance of getting out of the mess. I'll run over to Garthorne, and I can post this on the way."

Just then the door was opened and Nan came in.

"I hope I am not interrupting you," she said coldly.

"Not the slightest. Come in and sit down, and let us have one of our old cosy chats—we allies."

He spoke so lightly that the girl glanced at him in surprise.

"No, thank you. I came, at Margery's request, to ask you a question; that is all."

"Well, I can't answer any questions unless you sit down," he said; now that he had thought of a way out of the Rudyer complication, he was quite high-spirited.

"I have no wish to stay, thank you," said Nan, almost crossly. "When poor Godfrey is so ill, I have no time to gossip. Margery wishes to know whether anything has passed between you and Godfrey that you can tell her to ease her mind about him."

"In what way?" he asked, thinking to prolong the interview.

"Oh, Mr. Dallas, you surely must know what she means. This is no time for keeping us in suspense." And she looked reproachfully at him. "You would not have answered Margery in that way; and I am only here as Margery's substitute."

"I was wishing to prolong the interview, that is all. I am sorry if what I said annoyed you. No, I regret to say there is nothing I can tell your sister."

Nan, who had looked up sharply at the first sentence, turned away to leave the room, but stopped a minute, as if hesitating whether to say any more.

"I am sorry I am so unfortunate as always to seem to displease you, Miss Nan," said Dallas, taking advantage of her hesitation.

"You really do not displease me," answered Nan, trying to make her voice and manner suggestive of complete indifference. "I have not noticed anything. What I hesitated for just now was because uncle told me that I seemed rather less cordial than I should have been in my congratulations to you as we came from the station. I was not conscious of this, of course."

"Don't say any more, pray. It's a funny business altogether," he said, with a laugh, thinking to start his method of ridicule at once; "but the joke is about

played out. Mrs. Rudyer was always fond of a practical joke."

"Five years ago, you mean?" interposed Nan, looking up.

"Five? Yes, ten years ago," he replied coloring, "all her life. But I think this—"

He was interrupted by some one tapping very vigorously at the window. It was the widow, who beckoned to them to open it and let her in. And before he could stop her, the girl had thrown it open.

"Oh, Hugh, I'm ashamed of you," exclaimed Mrs. Rudyer. "Flirting with Nan right before my eyes, while my lips are scarcely cool from your kisses."

He tried to laugh, as if in pursuance of his new method, but he was too angry, and the laugh sounded particularly melancholy and hollow.

Then Nan, with a look which filled the cup of his wrath to overflowing, turned away and left the room, saying:

"I'll leave you together."

The widow burst into another laugh.

"It's no use, Hugh. You must see that. You only keep compromising yourself more and more, and twining the coil round you. But you mustn't flirt. You know you promised me faithfully—and especially with Nan," and she shook her finger at him with mock seriousness, and laughed again; till her manner changed suddenly, and she went to his side quickly, and slipped her hand into his and held it. "Don't be angry with me, Hugh. It's only for love of you."

Then it was her turn to be surprised, for the man laughed on his part

"Good, good, very good. Cleverly acted; for all the world as if we were not playing the fool together for the fun of it. But we have had enough of it now—at least, I can take my oath I have, and I don't mean to have any more," and getting away from her, he left the room and the house to go to Garthorne.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Hugh Dallas felt much curiosity as he sat waiting in his room for Esther Southerst, and as the time named for the interview came and passed, his impatience increased.

It was half-past two before a lad announced: "A lady to see you, sir," and Esther Southerst was shown in.

Dallas rose instantly, and looked at her very keenly and searchingly, and she returned his look steadily and defiantly.

She was a tall, strong-looking, dark, handsome woman, with sharp, shrewd features, thin lips, and an expression of great vigor, resolution, and strength of will. She was dressed soberly in black, and entered the room with a jaunty, swinging air, and looked at Dallas and then about the room with complete self-possession. She sat down without being asked, and turned to Dallas and laughed, showing a set of even, white teeth, with an expression that was pleasant to look upon.

"So you're the editor, are you, whom my Godfrey has taken into his confidence in order to frighten me?"

"Bold and clever," was Hugh Dallas' mental comment. "Must sit on that."

"If this interview is to lead anywhere except to the

jail, you will have to take a different tone," he said sternly.

She laughed defiantly, and got up at once.

"Shall I?" she said. "Then it had better lead there at once. I've not come here to be bullied by you. Good-by," and she walked to the door.

Hugh Dallas made neither answer nor movement.

"Do you hear me?" she said. "It had better lead there at once," she said.

"If you leave this room, it will," he said, without even looking round.

She went up to the door and stood by it with her hand on the handle, without speaking.

Dallas went on writing steadily, and in this way fully a minute passed. Then, however, she came swinging back across the room, with the same jaunty, devil-may-care manner, and sat down.

"I don't believe you," she said, laughing noisily, and looking at him defiantly; "but I'm not going to have the bother of coming all this way for nothing. I know you daren't give me in charge, don't you fear. You won't frighten me, though you can look so much in earnest. What have you brought me here for?"

"She's angry with herself for having been frightened. Good," thought Dallas.

"To tell you that your power over Godfrey Drury is at an end; to deal fairly with you if you are reasonable; to put you in jail for attempting to murder him if you are not. You can take your choice." He said this very firmly and deliberately.

Esther Southerst put her head on one side and looked

at him cunningly through half-lowered eyelids, and made no answer for some time. Then she said :

"How much has he told you? He's a horrid little liar, you know, and a beastly little coward. He's not your kind, and I don't fancy you know what he's done, or you wouldn't try that tone with me. It doesn't come natural to you to bully women. It does to him." And then she shook her head slowly and laughed good-humoredly and pleasantly. "How much *do* you know?" she said again after a pause.

"Enough to send you to a long term of penal servitude for conspiring with others to murder him."

"For what?" cried the woman, bursting again into a loud shrill laugh. "With others! Didn't I tell you he was a horrid little liar. What others do you think I should want to thrash him—a little poppity-pip like him. Why, I did it myself, of course ; but I suppose he was ashamed to own he'd been walloped by a woman. I just smacked his face when he defied me, the little sneak, and gave him a shove. A man wouldn't have known he'd been touched, but that little wrong-balanced chip just flip-flopped over the cliff and cracked his skull. Ah, and would have died probably, if I hadn't lugged him up. Did he tell you that?" asked the woman fiercely.

"He told me quite enough to prove that you made a very desperate attempt upon his life, and very nearly succeeded in killing him. For that you'll have to answer."

"If a man can larrup his wife to keep her in order, mayn't a woman cuff her husband when he gets beyond endurance?" she asked.

Dallas started at the question, and the woman noticed the gesture instantly.

"Ah," she said, "I see! He forgot to tell you that point, I suppose. Now, Mr. Dallas, don't you think we'd better understand one another? You took me in when I first came; you did; I give you credit for it, for you did it well. What's more, you frightened me a bit. I thought you knew everything and that he really did mean to round on me. But I can see now he's just misled you as he does everybody."

"There's no question about misleading anybody. Mr. Drury is determined to put an end to your persecution, that is all."

Dallas spoke firmly enough; but he was staggered by the woman's manner as well as by her words.

"Persecution," she echoed, with a sneer. "Poor little thing! Persecution—rubbish! If any one's been persecuted it's me—his wife; his lawful, wedded, deserted wife. Ah, you may look and stare; but that's what I am. And he knows it. And he knows that if he marries Miss Margery Allingham—with all her fine airs and her graces—he'll be committing a sin. And he won't do it. Not he. He daren't. And, what's more, I sha'n't let him. I'm no fool for him to play with as he likes. I chucked myself in the water once, you know; and he jolly soon had the thing hushed up. I'd chuck him in next sooner than let this marriage go on; blest if I wouldn't."

As she said this she looked angry enough to have done all that she threatened.

"You will please not to bluster here," said Dallas

calmly. "You say you are married. Where is your certificate?"

"Oh, he's put you up to that, has he? the little skunk," she said vehemently. "He's a mean little beast. I haven't got a certificate. Will that do for you?" She stared defiantly at Dallas.

"Yes, it shows the hollowness of your claim."

"Oh, does it?" she answered. "Well then, it just doesn't do anything of the sort. He took advantage of my affections and then tried to get rid of me. But he promised to marry me and he'll have to keep his promise. I swear he shall. I'm not going to have my heart broken by him."

Hugh Dallas looked into her face as she said this with a quiet, scrutinizing glance.

"All right," she said, her cheeks flushing very slightly. "You can think what you like about my loving such a twisted little sprat. But it don't matter whether I do or not. He's not going to desert me. Did he tell you he got me to go through what he called a marriage service with some one he called a parson, the little liar. And that when he thought he could safely get rid of me he up and told me the truth. But I'm not over-easy to chuck on one side. I love him too much," and she finished with an ill-sounding laugh.

"Well, I don't want to go into all the old matters between you," replied Dallas, "but I repeat that he is determined that at any cost your persecution shall cease."

The woman looked at Dallas with the same scrutinizing, penetrating expression, holding her head on one side and half-closing her eyelids.

"I didn't think you'd have used that word again," she said slowly. "It's not the word you'd use of your own free will, if you were writing about a girl who had been misled and refused to be chucked away like an old hat. And I'll tell you what"—she leaned forward as if speaking confidentially—"it's not the word which Nan Allingham would use if she knew the facts. Ah, you agree with me, I see."

"Don't introduce other names into the conversation, if you please," said Dallas sternly.

"Oh, yes, I shall," replied the woman instantly, with a return to her jaunty manner. "I shall speak of anybody I like. You've told me to come here; and I shall talk about what I choose. See? If I like to tell you that you're as blind as a bat not to see that Miss Nan just worships the ground you tread on, and that that sneaking little widow wants to part you, I shall do it. Oh, but I shall. She does love you. Oh yes, she does. And you'll be a fool if you let that Mrs. Rudyer gain her way. No, I sha'n't stop, and the more you frown and carry on, the more I shall speak. Why, look at your face—you're as red as a turkey-cock," and she laughed uproariously, at his evident embarrassment.

"Be silent," he cried angrily.

"You didn't expect I was going to round on you in that way, did you?" not taking the least notice of his protest. "Bless your heart, I know what goes on at the Manor House a deal better than you do."

"I'll have no more of this," said Dallas, rising. "You had better go, and I'll take other means to bring you to reason."

"Hoity-toity," laughed the woman, leaning back in her chair and looking at him impudently. "You're not going to frighten me again, don't you think it. If I do no more good than to bring you two to understand one another, I sha'n't have come here for nothing—"

"Be silent, and go away," cried Dallas.

"—for I like Miss Nan, and I like what I've heard of you," she continued, quite unmoved by what he said, "and I like you for all your anger at hearing that a pretty girl worships you. I haven't got a bad heart, I can tell you, when I'm treated right, and"— here she paused and looked at him; and then shook her head and smiled very pleasantly as she finished—"you're not the sort to treat a woman other than right. I'm not a bit afraid of you. But now"— and her manner changed again to grave earnestness—"I'm going to tell you the truth. Straight, I am, and I'll leave you to judge whether you think I'm right."

Dallas sat down again.

"If that is so, I'll listen, but no more—rubbish. I shall not listen to that."

"It's no rubbish; you know that, Mr. Dallas," answered the woman, her eyes brightening with mischief. "She does love you, and I'm glad—"

"Will you—"

"All right, I won't say any more except about Godfrey. I've called him my husband. Take these letters and read them, and see whether I'm not right in doing so."

She put a packet of letters into his hands, and he glanced through them.

They were written in a hand which he recognized as that of Godfrey Drury. They were all addressed to Esther Southerst, and were couched in the most loving terms. Many of them began "My dearest wife," "My darling wife," and were signed "Your loving husband," "Your lonely husband," or simply "Your husband."

As Dallas read them his face darkened, for he could judge the character of the writer in what he had written, and he could trace the rise and wane of the passion. When he had given them a hasty reading, he laid them down on his desk, and the woman handed him three or four more.

"You have seen there how he loved me; now read how he can hate—and fear."

He read these more carefully, and several times flinched and winced at the brutality shown in certain parts of the letters. All the time he was reading she kept her keen, searching gaze fixed steadily upon his face, noting every expression that passed over his features.

"There's no need for you to say what you think of them," she said as soon as he had finished; "I've read that in your face. That's the man who's to marry Margery Allingham."

"No doubt he has regretted writing some of these letters," he said, laying his hand on the last letters she had given him.

"Regretted fiddlesticks," she answered, with a contemptuous gesture. "He regrets the others, may be—regrets that he was ever such a fool as to put on paper what he has said a thousand times, and with a

thousand times more passion. Bah, you don't know him yet—no one knows him at the Manor House. He's like a passionate kid if he wants anything, yelling and screeching till he gets it; and then he's like a blessed fiend for mischief, and loves to trample, and stamp, and kick it to bits. But he won't trample me."

"You have no claim on him, you must see that; and certainly you have no regard for him. You've shown that you can only get yourself into trouble; why not come to some arrangement, therefore, and leave him to go his way in peace?"

"If I do, may I rot!" cried the woman, in a flash of fury. "No, no, I'll tell you what I mean to do. I mean to stop this marriage by hook or by crook, and you know perfectly well, Mr. Dallas, that those letters are strong enough to let me do that. I tell you again they don't know what Godfrey's real character is, and, when I choose to speak out, that marriage will be impossible. *He shall marry me.* I began by writing a letter or two, to you and young Squire Ramsay, and Miss Allingham, and Godfrey himself. They did no good, so I went and saw him. I told him he shouldn't marry, and he was like a fury, raved, and stamped, and swore, and, I believe, would have killed me if he could have done it safely. I just took hold of him and held him, and when I let him go he broke out again and tried to strike me. It was then I gave him the clout on the head."

"But do you mean to say you seriously think of keeping him from marrying by fear of personal violence?"

"How many sorts of a fool do you take me for?"

she answered roughly. "No, I don't mean anything of the kind. Though he's such a skimpy imp of malice and nastiness, he's the son of a man whose name all round the country-side is known for honor, and truth, and fairness. You know what he'd do if he had a sight of those letters you've seen. The girl, too—though why she's marrying that misshapen image when she's just head over heels in love with a proper man like young Squire Ramsay fairly beats me—is straight and true as a needle, so everybody says, and I guess she'd squint a bit if she saw what's written there. You know all that well enough, Mr. Dallas, and so does he," and she shook her head, "and that's just what makes him fairly mad."

Dallas recognized in a moment the strength of all this, as well as the woman's keenness in judging the position, and he sat for a time silently thinking it all over.

Then he turned to her, and asked suddenly:

"Why are you so anxious to marry young Mr. Drury?"

"Because I love him so much," answered the woman, with a sneering laugh, "because he's such a lovable creature, because I want to keep him from other people, because I don't want him to make any other woman miserable, because I choose, or because I mean to make his life a hell to him; any reason I please, or any that you like to fit on. I don't care."

"I'll fit one. Because he's rich," said Dallas.

"Maybe," she answered calmly, but with a tell-tale flush.

"What will induce you to renounce your claim?"

"What's going to repay me for giving up being made a lady of?"

"You can best tell that," was the short answer.

"It's no question of money, I can tell you. So don't you think that. I'm not a beast to be bought or sold. Right in the very first place he must agree to marry no one else. If he's such a hound that he won't keep his word, he's not going to shove me out in order to put some one in my place. That's straight; and unless that's agreed to, I'm not going to say another word. I can earn my living; I'm not such a fool as not to be able to do that. I'm independent of him. Are you going to agree to that?"

"I'm going to agree to nothing. I only tell you for your own interest that if you insist on impossible conditions, the only thing that will happen will be exposure; and when once that is over, all your claims won't be worth sixpence."

"Won't they? Won't they? Oh, yes, they will. I know the old captain better than that; don't you fear. But what care I? I can earn my living; if I choose to have my revenge on the little monkey"—it seemed to afford her infinite pleasure to call him by abusive terms, and she repeated them at times with manifest relish—"I can afford to pay for it. No, my mind's made up fast as an iron safe. If he don't marry me, he don't marry any one, and that's flat."

"Then I shall advise him to face everything and prosecute you for attempting to murder him," said Dallas, getting up from his chair to show that the interview was at an end.

"Oh, no, you won't," she answered firmly. "And

if you did, the captain wouldn't ; and if the captain would, Miss Margery wouldn't marry him afterwards. See? You're only trying to bounce me. But you won't do it. Not quite. I tell you again, and I mean it, Mr. Dallas, as sure as you're a gentleman of your word and honor, if he don't marry me, he don't marry any one. Good-bye."

She went to the door and then turned back to him.

"I should like to shake hands with you, Mr. Dallas. Do you mind? I know you're true and grit yourself for all you're on such a bad side. And I like a man."

She held out her hand and he took it.

"Don't forget what I said about Miss Nan. She's got all those flowers you ever gave her, and odds and ends you've thought nothing of, maybe. That's a pretty sure sign with us women. No, don't look vexed and angry ; it's the truth. When you marry her don't forget it was I helped to open your eyes. She's a lucky girl."

She had held his hand in her firm, strong grasp all this time, and then she dropped it suddenly and left the room quickly.

Hugh Dallas, who had colored at her words, look, and gesture, turned to his desk with a sense of discomfort at the awkwardness and seeming absurdity of the position. But his thoughts were busy with her words about Nan.

CHAPTER XXV.

Hugh Dallas thought long and carefully over his interview with Esther Southerst ; and the more he pondered it, the less he liked the position in which it placed him.

If what she said were true, nay, if half or a quarter of it were true, it was idle to pretend any longer that a girl of Margery Allingham's nature could be anything but utterly wretched as the wife of such a man. If, therefore, knowing what he knew, he did not interfere, he would be sentencing the girl to lifelong misery. On the other hand, he could not interfere without betraying the confidence which Godfrey had placed in him.

As for the woman herself, Esther Southerst, he summed up her demands readily.

"'The jingling of the guinea helps the hurt that honor feels,'" he mused, with a curl of the lip. "She acts well ; but it only means more money. She's got the whip hand, and she knows it, too. But she can be bought off as easily as a local politician ; but not so cheaply. It'll take from £500 to £1,000 to close those very determined lips of hers ; and even then, if I were the man, I shouldn't feel over safe. What a woman she is : as jaunty as a post-office girl and as impudent as—as an advertisement canvasser. Won-

der how she gets her information about the Manor House?"

Here he stopped speaking to himself and smiled as he thought of what she had said about Nan.

"Here, this won't do. I shall moon the whole of the day away. But it's pleasant work running up those jerry-built castles and just peopling them as one would wish. Heigho!"

Then he roused himself, and taking some paper, wrote to Godfrey.

"Dear Mr. Drury,—I trust you are making quick progress on the up grade. I have had an interview to-day, and the result is to leave the impression on my mind that the affair will lend itself to some form of settlement—though it may prove costly. A curious condition has indeed been mentioned; but I take it that it is only intended to raise the price."

"I must give the beggar a dig or two," he thought when he had written thus far.

"If what I am told is in any degree true, the affair is one which calls for liberal treatment; if not, then probably it might be best to fight.

"I am sorry I cannot get to see you; but unfortunately illness has laid one of our staff by, marriage has carried away another, while a number of most important matters have arranged to happen just at this juncture.—Yours sincerely, Hugh Dallas."

What he said about the pressure of his work was aggravated the next day by the discovery of some most

scandalous frauds by some well-known local public men; and the difficulty of investigation, coupled with the close consideration of the many charges against the persons involved, required his constant and unremitting attention. Thus he dare not leave.

Wednesday's post brought him a reply from Godfrey.

"Dear Mr. Dallas,—I thank you inexpressibly for what you have done; but you have made me anxious to hear all that has passed. You have raised hopes where despair was killing me. I am like a shipwrecked man on a desert island who sees a sail in the distance and wonders if it spells rescue. Merely to have secured your help seemed to put fresh life into me; and now this has made me almost well. They cannot understand it here. But ah, they do not know. Pray God they never will.

"What steps shall we take next?—Your sincerest friend, "Godfrey Drury."

"What a tangled skein of emotions is that man's mind," was Dallas's comment on the letter. But he could do nothing that day nor the next; nor could he venture to go away for the week end as he had hoped, as another member of the staff—one of the sub-editors—was taken ill.

On the Saturday came another letter from the Manor House.

"Dearest Hugh,"—("Confound the woman," cried Dallas angrily, as he read this in Mrs. Rudyer's handwriting.)—"Do come over to-day. I am pining for a sight of you. If you don't come to me, I shall make

some kind of excuse and go over to you. I can't stand being so close to you and yet never seeing you. If you come to-day, I'll forgive you all your naughty coldness; for I shall know then that, although for propriety's sake you keep up the pretense of being distant, you do really care."

"Artful little devil," said Dallas, with a suppressed grin. "Knows I meant to go over if I could, and tries to turn it this way to her own use. Good thing I can't go. Good for that at any rate."

"This place is getting awful. I don't know what you've done to that dreadful Godfrey, but I should think you've bewitched him. After you left last Monday—and what a long time that does seem to me, dearest; I wonder if it does to you?—he seemed to get well by magic. Tuesday the girls told me he had a letter from you—though if you could find time to write to him, I do think it unkind not to send me even a paper, just to let me know you are alive—and then he seemed almost as cheerful as an ordinary individual. You see what a power you are, Hugh, to raise one's spirits; ah, don't I know it! Just as I know how cruel you can be. Well, the house was less like a cemetery chapel and getting about as festive as a cathedral, till this morning, when that dreadful young man nearly killed us all at breakfast—at least he nearly did me; and even Nan—though she hasn't much sympathy, which isn't, of course, her fault, for people can't help their natures, can they?—looked less frigid than usual. She's wonderfully changed lately, has

Nan ; and the only time she ever brightens up is when that Mr. Momerie comes over, and of course that's only natural, because Guy tells me he thinks they're secretly engaged already, though why secretly I can't imagine, for of course he's very rich and in every way a splendid match for her, because she has nothing, and of course is not much to look at, though you did at one time care to flirt with her, until I asked you as a favor not to do anything of the kind. Well, I suppose poor Mr. Godfrey had some unpleasant letters or something, for as soon as he'd opened and read one of them, he gave a great cry and went as white as the tablecloth, and you know he's never very nice to look at when he goes white ; the blueness round his eyes and at his temples makes him look horrid, and when his lips all go blue, and to-day they were perfectly livid, and his nose was all drawn and lined, you've seen how the nostrils dilate, because your sharp eyes see everything—except my feelings—and he looked awful. I declare I thought he swallowed something and it had gone the wrong way, till I remembered it would have made him red, not white ; and he was as white as white, and sat in his chair with his fists clenched and his teeth chattering like any one with ague, and all the time he glared at Margery—who hadn't done a thing —until, if it had been at me, I should have been frightened, or else have gone and shaken him. She went to him ; you know what a kind, patient, meek soul she is—too meek I think ; it doesn't do to give way to all your tantrums, you men. There, what do you think of that for independence? But I'd give way to yours, Hugh—and he jumped up and twisted away

from her, as if she were a plague, and limped out of the room. She followed him of course, and we heard him—I think he swore at her, but I didn't say what I thought, and coughed lest it should reach Nan's or Guy's ears. Any way, she came in looking awfully white and shocked and trembling, and after exchanging a look with Nan—and from having been unmoved before Nan had gone quite red—she sat down and went on with breakfast, just as if nothing had happened. I don't know what it was, and when I asked Margery, she wouldn't say a word. She is so funny. Of course it's no concern of mine, but I can only say that the place isn't bearable now. If you don't come over and see me soon I sha'n't be able to stay. Do come.—Ever yours, BEATRICE.

"*P. S.*—I forgot to say that Nan asked me this afternoon whether you were coming over? I was glad of this, though I don't know why she should seem anxious about your coming. Still, it shows that they see here who is likely to know most about your movements.

"*P. P. S.*—I open this to say that that queer creature, Godfrey, hearing that I was writing to you—though how it can have got about that you and I correspond I hardly know, I've not said much about it—has just asked me whether you are coming over to-morrow. He looks awfully wild and curious, and I have a notion that there's been an awful row between him and Margery this afternoon. I caught Margery silently weeping, and you know, whatever her weaknesses may be, she's not weepy; and I rather think Guy was in it

in some way, for I heard him storming about in his boyish way. But I suppose it can't have been much, or I should have heard something definite, and no one has told me a word. Do come over. "Bee."

"Can she have begun again?" he mused, thinking of Esther Southerst. "Who can it be who keeps her going as to what happens at the place? It must be one of the servants. Depend upon it, that's what it means. He's had a letter from her, and it's unnerved him. What the deuce is the line she's taking now? Evidently it's put him off the balance with Margery. I have it. She's driven another peg in about Alan. I wish I could go over. One thing, he's got my letter this morning saying definitely that I can't go. I shall hear something during the day. Now, what shall I do about this artful little fool?" He picked up Mrs. Rudyer's letter and put it back in the envelope. "Shall I return it? No, by Jove, if I do she'll flourish the envelope around, and make out that I've written her a long love-letter. I'll keep it and give it back to her."

He put it in his pocket and turned to the consideration of some papers that lay on his desk. But a few minutes later he broke off, and. pushing back his chair, paced the room slowly, thinking anxiously.

"Beastly awkward," he muttered. "If that infernal woman has fired the flame of that fellow's jealousy, and, as isn't at all unlikely, has gone one point better in her last letter, and hinted Alan's name, I can't get him to go to the Manor House, and tell the truth about this supposed engagement. I can't go myself,

and so the lie gets all the benefit of a long start, that'll make it all the harder to catch. Dash it!"—this with a smile of vexation which hardened on his face into an expression of rather cynical annoyance—"she can't be such a fool as to think she's going to worry me into marrying her with all this tomfoolery of pretended affection. I don't know. She's a resolute little monkey when her back's up. She may. Well, anyhow, I'm hanged if I can see my way to do anything but just let things slide till I can get away. Gad, I shall open her eyes by and by with a vengeance. She'll drive me to show her up in earnest yet."

Soon afterwards he went back to his work again, but was restless and uneasy; and this continued until he had to go out to an interview, at which certain important decisions in respect to the matters of the frauds were expected to be made.

When he came back some two hours later he found a telegram:

"Am ill and desperate. Can you not possibly come over if only for an hour? Something is miserably wrong somewhere. "GODFREY DRURY."

This message increased Dallas's anxiety, but the meeting which he had just been to made his presence in the town more needed than ever. He wired a short reply:

"Regret. Quite impossible. Write me. DALLAS."

He had scarcely sent it off when an office messenger entered.

"A lady to see you, sir."

"A lady? Who is it?" he answered, his thoughts flying immediately to Mrs. Rudyer.

"She didn't give her name, sir."

"Well, I can see nobody to-day. I am for too busily engaged. Tell the lady she must write to me.

The lad went away, but returned after a minute.

"The lady says her business is most important and private. Here's her name, sir," and he handed a slip of paper to Dallas.

"Show her in at once," said the latter, as he glaned at the slip of paper, and read the name "Esther Southerst."

The woman came in with her usual jaunty air.

"You didn't expect to see me again so soon, did you?" she asked smiling, and showing her white teeth.

"No," answered Dallas shortly, "and as I am exceedingly busy, you must please to say quickly what you have to say."

"I don't know about quickly. Strikes me you'll want to ask a question or two before I've done. However, you can take your own time. Why didn't you go to Seacove this week? They were all expecting you; and Mrs. Rudyer made cock sure of it."

"Please say what you have to say, and leave my movements alone," answered Dallas sharply, with an impatient wave of the hand.

"They are though, as you'll very soon see," she returned confidently. "I expected you'd be there, and therefore I meant to hurry matters up. I know Godfrey; and I know the need there is to keep dig-

ging at him in a sore place. I dug hard this time; for I reckoned you'd be there to clap a plaster on if necessary. And as you're not there, and not going there to-day, there's just the devil and all to pay."

"For heaven's sake, my good soul, say what you want to say in plain language that I can understand, and then go away. I've no time to spare," he said impatiently.

"Well, you'll have to find some, that's all," was the calm reply. "Here's what I've done. I didn't feel over satisfied with my interview with you, and when I heard that that little limping bantam was out of his bed and getting well fast, I wrote to him. You thought I was after money and nothing else, didn't you? and when I thought over what you said, I thought an eye-opener for you might be handy as well. You see I'm not after money; I want my pretty husband,"—she laughed at this; and Dallas made a gesture of impatience. "All right, let me take my time; it'll be quicker in the long run. Well, I wrote to him and told him that you were off the track; that I didn't want money but wanted him, and meant to have him; and that he needn't be too much put out about it all because, as I'd put in my unsigned letter to him, his pretty lady-love was in love with somebody else, and that that somebody was young Squire Ramsay; and I added one or two little things which I knew of the two, and told him if he didn't believe me, he could ask either or both of them. See?" and when she stopped, she fixed her dark eyes on Dallas and nodded.

"Go on," he said sternly.

"Yes, you're right. There's more to come. I

don't do things by halves when I mean business," she continued, her face growing very stern and determined; "so I followed up my letter by going over there myself. I got over last night and let him know at once I was there and meant to see him—and there, don't you see, I made a mistake. I reckoned you'd be over, and that I should get you two together sometime to-day. But I didn't thread the needle, for all my blessed cleverness and planning—you can't always do it first try. For one thing, you didn't go over; and for the second, that little jackanapes went nearly off his head after that letter of mine had raised a devil in him which no one about him knew lived there; and he dropped into that moody, broody, sulky state that he gets into when he can't have his own way and there's nobody about that he can jolly well thrash. I saw him —he dared not refuse to come to me, you see—but I did no good with him. He's just like a madman; fact he is one; he's just what he was when he came to me once and meant making an end of me. Have you ever seen him when the devil's in him?"

"Go on with what you have to say."

"Well, if you haven't, you can't tell what a raging little beast it is. I've seen him stamp and tear and kick and beat things—anything that thwarts him—and he's as cunning as the devil with it all. I've seen him like it with a dog—seen him beat it and stamp on it, till I've turned sick and had to take him and hold him for minutes together and coax him to get him round. I could do it then." She said this with almost the only touch of softness in her face and voice that Dallas had ever noticed when she spoke of Godfrey.

"And that's why I've come over to see you. He's not safe."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. He's not safe. He ought to be watched; for there's no one in the whole house who knows him or knows what he may do."

"Nonsense, my good woman. Don't come here with such a rubbishy story."

Esther Southerst drew herself up and looked hard at Dallas, then she leant right forward towards him and spoke in a low tone, full of strange, vibrating earnestness.

"Don't mistake me, Mr. Dallas. I know what I am saying. I know that about Godfrey which no one in the Manor House knows, except that poor old man, his father. I'm not so hard a woman that I haven't pitied that brave old soul a hundred times. Do you know the secret that he carries about with him that has made his whole life full of gloom and sorrow?"

"I have no wish to know any secrets of his," answered Dallas.

The woman paused again.

"Did you ever hear the cause why Godfrey is a cripple?" she asked.

Dallas held up his hand with a deprecating gesture.

"Ah, then, it's time you did," said the woman dryly. "That's the old man's secret. His mother died a raving lunatic in an asylum, some years after she had crippled the boy for life when trying to kill him by hurling him out of the top window in her madness. That's why I say he must be watched. He's mad."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Dallas; "do you mean that?"

"Ah, I thought it would shake you up a bit that. Yes, I do mean it. And I mean more. I've seen him mad—as mad as he could be for three days, when he tried to murder me; and what's more, I've driven him now into that state with this last step of mine, plunging him back into despair and jealousy, after I suppose you had set him flourishing with hope, that he's not to be trusted without some one about the place who knows what to watch him for. I've come over to tell you, because I feel just positive that if he takes the fit into his head, that girl's life, Lord bless you, wouldn't be worth a day's purchase—either of the sisters for that matter—if he took the fancy. I know him. I tell you he's fairly mad with jealousy and blind rage."

CHAPTER XXVI.

There was clearly but one possible course open.

Hugh Dallas felt that at any cost he must go to the Manor House that day. He wired that he would be over late in the evening, and immediately set about making arrangements to enable him to leave the office.

Then he wired to Alan Ramsay not to go to the Manor House, but to expect him first thing on the following morning at Garthorne. He felt that if by chance Alan should happen to go there, Godfrey might be driven to some extreme of rage, and that mischief might result.

He had a very ugly business in front of him, and he was very anxious as to what line to take. So far as he could judge, there were two alternative courses. The first was to deal with Esther Southerst, and thus be able to free Godfrey's mind from the chief anxiety that was preying upon it, and then trust to whatever might happen to explain away the jealousy which she had roused. That was the course he preferred; but it depended upon whether she could really be bought off on any terms; and having had this in his thoughts, he had sent her away with instructions to return in an hour.

The alternative to this was to tell the captain every-

thing about the relations between Godfrey and Esther Southerst—everything, indeed, except about the love between Margery and Alan. But the thought of having to inflict this pain upon him was distressing. At the same time, he told himself, the occasion was one so serious and critical that the remedy must be drastic. If he satisfied himself that Godfrey's mind was really unhinged, the latter must at least be watched, even if he were not put under restraint; and the only person to whom he could possibly speak on that subject was the captain.

When Esther Southerst came back, Dallas went at once to the kernel of the matter.

"Tell me on what terms you will cease this cruel persecution."

"You want a straight answer?" she said.

"Of course."

"On none except what I told you before. If he won't marry me, he marries no one else. If he sticks to his refusal to marry me, then he must make me a proper allowance."

"Ah, I see, it's a matter of money?"

"It's not a matter of money," she said, turing on him vindictively, "at least, so far as his marriage is concerned. I swear to you that no sum of money you can name can buy my consent to his marrying any one else."

"Why? What on earth can it matter to you? If he does not marry you, what difference can it make what he does? Take a hundred pounds and go your way, and marry some one in your own station."

"I won't take a thousand pounds—no, nor ten thou-

sand either," she cried fiercely. "If you say any more to try and buy me off, I won't stop here."

"Well, but don't you see how foolish you are, and how you stand in your own light? If once this secret is made known, your power will be gone. You may think you will turn Miss Allingham against him, but you will do nothing of the kind. So that you will not stop the marriage, and will lose any claim upon the generosity of the family."

"Generosity!" she sneered, her thin lips curling. "I'm not a beggar. Here, stop it," she cried angrily. "I won't have any more of it. My heavens! haven't you seen enough of me in this room to know that that little devil will be afraid to move a finger in this marriage, whether the secret's known or not, without me? Are you fool enough to think that that marriage was postponed because he was hurt? Bah! it was funk, sheer funk; and the thing was put off so that I might be got to consent. That was why he got well so quickly when he thought you had succeeded; and that's why he's precious nearly mad now he knows the whole thing's off again. He knows me, if you don't; and he's jolly well sure his little rat's life wouldn't be worth a silver sixpence if he set me at defiance. Don't you make any mistake! And now my last word is that he sha'n't marry—sha'n't, sha'n't, do you hear?"

And from that determination nothing that Dallas could say availed to move her. He tried every persuasion he could think of, but all to no purpose. Whenever he showed her that she would be a loser by the matter being exposed, she laughed at him, and re-

plied that she was perfectly well aware that the captain would not let that be the case.

He started for Seacove with the plain assurance that he must either persuade Godfrey to give up the marriage—and he felt the impossibility of this—or make a clean breast of everything to the captain.

Captain Drury met him at the station, and it was plain to see that he was suffering keenly. He looked very worried and so depressed that Dallas was much affected. On the way from the station—the captain was driving—very little was said.

"It's very good of you to come over. I'm afraid it's a great inconvenience; but I felt very glad when your telegram came. My poor boy is not at all well—not at all. I don't know what it can be. I want to have a chat with you about it when you've seen him. He won't have a doctor; and I don't know that a doctor would do him any good."

"I was afraid he was not well, though he seemed to get on pretty well in the early part of the week, didn't he?"

"Yes, a good deal better. I suppose Mrs. Rudyer told you, did she? I heard she was writing now and then. She's been very kind; but I'm afraid it's been a trying week for her."

He seemed to think he ought to make excuses to Dallas on her account.

"This is no time to enter into my matters or the mistakes which you all seem to have made in regard to Mrs. Rudyer and myself," answered Dallas, with a feeling of impotent irritation that that subject always seemed to be mentioned at a time and in a manner

which made explanation of the mistake difficult or impossible. "How did you notice any change in your son?" he asked.

"We'll talk it all over after you've seen him, Mr. Dallas. I'd rather that you saw him first and formed your own opinion without a word from me. But I wish—there, I don't know—" He hesitated, stopped, and then resumed. "Yes, I'd better say it. I wish if you can get a chance while you see him, and there's anything that I could be told or could know or do—that you'd get him to tell me, or be able to tell me yourself. We used to have no secrets at all, the lad and I; but somehow—I don't know how"—and he sighed—"a something seems to have crept in between us. Poor lad!"

He said no more, and Dallas was also silent, until they reached the Manor House.

In the hall, Margery, looking pale and worn, met them, and thanked Dallas with one of her sweet smiles for coming over. Then Nan came forward from where she had heen hovering in the background, and shook hands; and as their hands touched, despite the gloom of the moment and the errand on which he had gone over, a recollection of Esther Southerst's words flashed across his memory, and warmed the glance with which his eyes sought and held hers. He noticed, too, that she colored as she turned away.

The next minute he was following the captain to the room where Godfrey was.

It was easy to see that the cripple was ill both in mind and body. When the captain and Dallas entered the room, he looked round with a startled, nervous

manner, as if anticipating some unwelcome visitor, and a look of intense relief appeared on his face when he saw that it was Hugh Dallas.

"I'm not very well," he said, in reply to a question when they shook hands. Then he looked at his father as if waiting impatiently for him to go.

The old man noticed the look.

"I thought you'd like to see Mr. Dallas as soon as he arrived, Godfrey," he said. "Shall I leave you together?"

"Yes, father; and don't let any one come bothering here till I ring or call."

He went to the door with the captain, and as soon as the latter left, the cripple closed it after him. Then he came back slowly to where Hugh Dallas sat, and stood before him, looking fixedly into his face.

"Well?" said Dallas gravely.

"There is nothing well," answered the other impetuously. "All is bad—as bad as it can be."

He took three hasty turns up and down the room, biting his nails with agitation. Then he came again and stood before Dallas, and said, with sudden and vehement anger:

"Have you deceived me, or have you been deceived?"

"Neither," answered Dallas quietly. "In what way do you mean?"

"I mean about Alan Ramsay. Is he an old lover of Margery? Does she love him? Is she marrying me out of pity, contemptuous, hateful, damnable pity?" he cried vehemently, working up his excitement and anger as he spoke.

"What has put this into your head?" asked Dallas.

"That's it. That's just it," he exclaimed, with a violent gesture. "Fight shy of the question, answer it by another, like a d—d Welshman. Fence with it; parry it; guard it; and laugh at me in your sleeve." He was striding up and down the room as he spoke, throwing his hands about. "Good God, man, can't you say yes or no? Is Margery Allingham in love with Alan Ramsay? Do you know it, or think it, or believe it? Can't you say yes or no to that?"

"It is no concern of mine whatever," answered Dallas, rather curtly. "It is not a matter on which I could have any knowledge of my own; and for me to express any thoughts or belief would be simply impertinence."

The cripple stopped and looked into Dallas's face, and then burst into an angry laugh.

"Impertinence, aye, anything to evade the point. Impertinence! The same sort of impertinence, I suppose, that if you saw a poor devil drowning would prevent your catching him by the hair or the throat in order to save his life. You don't see, do you, that this is a life and death matter to me, and so you talk about impertinence. I thought you were a friend."

He spoke with concentrated bitterness, and then with a shrug of his shoulders and a contemptuous sneer, he resumed his rapid walk.

"Why on earth is it that not a soul in the house will give me a straightforward answer? Why can it be, except that they don't like to lie to me, and won't tell me the truth—out of this infernal feeling of d—d

sniveling pity. Is there a conspiracy among you all?" He spoke very wildly, and gesticulated furiously.

"What grounds have you for all this nonsense?" asked Dallas sternly.

"Read that and see," replied Godfrey, thrusting a letter, creased, thumbed, and crumpled with much fingering into his hand.

He unfolded it and read it.

"I hear you are better, and are again thinking of marriage. Give it up. You are only fooling yourself. You are mine, and nothing will ever release you. Your friend, Mr. Dallas thinks I can be bought off, and he will probably tell you so. He is wrong. I am not for sale. *You* ought to know that.

"Godfrey, you must give this marriage up. If you were to go on with it, you'd only be wronging the girl as well as me. She doesn't love you ; I told you that when I wrote to you without putting my name to it. I told you she loved another man. I repeat that. The man is young Squire Ramsay. If you don't believe me, ask her and ask him. Ask whether they were not all but engaged to be married? Ask whether she usen't to keep a lot of little keepsakes of his in a little packet in her mother's desk? She won't deny it, though she may try and fence with the questions, for she wants to make believe that she's in love with you. Fancy that, with you, when a real man like Squire Ramsay is contrasted with you. Even you can tell whether a girl's likely to prefer *you* to such a MAN as him. I suppose she pities you for your shape and

that. But it don't matter what her motive is—good, bad, or foolery—she's not going to marry you.

"I shall follow this letter myself, and let you know where to find me at Seacove.—Your wife that means to be, "ESTHER."

It was a cruel letter, and as clever as cruel. Written just in the form likely to stab the man most deeply; and as Dallas read it and handed it back to the other, knowing his nature, he pitied him intensely. As Godfrey took it, he glanced again at the closing sentences, comparing him with Alan Ramsay, and he seemed to writhe with the torture they inflicted.

"Now you see why I ask?" he said, hoarsely and nervously, as soon as he recovered self-possession enough to speak. "The she-devil! I wish to God she was in my power," and he clenched his fists and raised them high above his head. "The she-devil! Is it true, Mr. Dallas—is it true, do you think?" he cried, altering his manner with startling suddenness to piteous entreaty.

"I should say not, from what I have seen; but I, of course, know nothing," answered Dallas.

The cripple cast on him a long, searching, appealing glance, in which the pain and anguish seemed to speak through his eyes; and then turning away, he threw himself into a chair and covered his face with his hands, in distressing emotion.

His companion waited silently for the fit of passion to pass. He was much moved by the great anguish which Godfrey was enduring, and he noted how thin and white and wan he had grown. This great emo-

tion made the task he had to perform all the more trying; but what he had seen already forced upon him the extreme need of finding some form of solution.

When the mental storm had subsided, Godfrey appeared less excited than he had been before, and made a great effort at self-composure.

"I am not myself," he said. "Excuse me if I seem wild or passionate, but I have been suffering so bitterly that I scarce know what I am doing. I will try for a moment to get away from the hell which that woman's letter raises whenever I think of it. Tell me what she said to you. She told you something of what had passed between us, I presume, and some fanciful tale about my being pledged to marry her. She is a liar, but a good deal of it is true. Never mind that. Will she release me? You said in your letter you thought she would."

He waited with intense eagerness written on his face.

"I thought so when I wrote. I thought she had a price, but—"

"But what?" interrupted Godfrey, frowning in impatience.

"I have seen her again to-day, and now she swears that nothing shall make her yield her claims—nothing but one condition."

"What is that? what is that?" he cried, leaning forward, while his eyes opened to their widest extent and his lips parted with the strain of an almost ravenous anxiety. "Tell me quickly, for God's sake."

"That if you will not marry her, you pledge yourself not to marry any one."

"What?" he asked.

It seemed at first as if he had not understood the full meaning of the condition, dwelling too much on the fact that there was one possible means of escape. He got up from his chair and went to the mantelpiece, and rested his hands on it, and leaned his forehead on them.

Then Dallas saw him shiver and tremble as if the truth had forced itself upon him. He lifted his head, and turned his face toward Dallas, his large eyes full of melancholy, which touched the stronger man to the heart.

"That would mean that I must give up Margery?" he asked, his voice hollow and trembling and low.

"She will be satisfied with nothing else," replied Dallas.

The cripple paused, and leant his head again in his hands.

"And you—what do you advise?" he asked, without looking round.

"I see no other course—unless you can face exposure," was the answer, gently, yet firmly spoken.

"You forget," said Godfrey, after another silence, looking up with the same exquisite melancholy speaking in every feature and in every tone of his tremulous voice. "There is another. There is death. I would rather die than give her up." And then in a lower, inner tone: "And rather see her dead than married to another.

Then he looked nervously and hurriedly at Dallas, as if surprised into voicing his thoughts; and he threw himself again into his chair, and hid his face from the other man's searching gaze.

CHAPTER XXVII.

For several minutes neither spoke.

The cripple remained with his hands tightly pressed to his face; and Hugh Dallas thought it best that the storm and stress of feeling should have time to abate.

They were sitting like this in perfect silence; Dallas watching the other with grave, kindly scrutiny, trying to estimate the strength and meaning of the emotions under which he had spoken, and considering how best to continue the talk, when the door opened quickly; there was a rustle of sweeping silk, and Mrs. Rudyer came hurriedly into the room.

"Oh, here you are, Hugh," she cried. "They told me you had come, and I was determined to find you. They said you were too busy to see me, dear. But I knew that couldn't be so, could it? Oh, Mr. Godfrey, I beg your pardon. I didn't know you were here or see you. I thought Hugh was alone."

This was false, of course, and Dallas knew it was false.

Both men had started up at her entrance; and Godfrey turned away so that his face should be out of the reach of her inquisitive eyes.

"We are very much engaged just now, Mrs. Rudyer," he said, in a tone so stern that Godfrey looked round wonderingly. "I must beg you to leave us." And he went to the door, and held it open for her.

"Am I to be sent away like a naughty child?" she asked playfully, and with a laugh. "You do look a cross thing; and yet I only wanted to see you as soon as possible." She spoke with the accent of a cross child. "Shall you be long, Hugh?"

"This is no time for farce-playing," he said, again very sternly; and as soon as she had gone he closed the door behind her, and walked back to his chair.

"That is a most unpleasantly frivolous woman," he said, as he sat down. "She jars on me most discordantly."

"I thought that you and Mrs. Rudyer—" Godfrey began, and then hesitated, and stopped in some confusion.

"Yes, I remember; when I was here last time you said something about congratulations," answered Dallas, smiling to himself at the incongruity of interpolating an explanation of his own bothers at such a moment of crisis in Godfrey's affairs. "But that, of course, is all nonsense. Mrs. Rudyer has led to this complete misunderstanding of everything. There is no foundation for anything of the kind you mean—no foundation whatever. It is utterly impossible, and Mrs. Rudyer has spread the rumor, I fear designedly, simply for some purpose of her own." Then it suddenly flashed upon him that if he were to speak confidentially of himself, he might draw the other on presently to speak fully from his side. "It's an odd thing to sandwich in my affairs between yours; but we are friends, and have grown intimate in this. I was engaged to her once, you know—"

"Yes, I know. She told us all that; and that you

will renew the engagement so soon as a decent time has elapsed."

"Ah, I see. Well, it's a rough thing to say about a woman, but she is just trying to bluff me into an entanglement, and for that object carries on before your people in the way you have seen."

"You don't care for her?" asked the other.

"I wouldn't marry her if there was no other woman in the world," he exclaimed vigorously.

"But you can get rid of *her*," said Godfrey, with a heavy sigh.

And this showed where the incident had touched him; and the tone in which the cripple spoke concentrated Dallas's thoughts once more on Godfrey's troubles. He thought that he had mentioned the incidents affecting Mrs. Rudyer in vain; but after a minute's pause, Godfrey asked:

"Supposing you had been compromised with Mrs. Rudyer really, and wanted to be freed, what would you do?"

"My way is a short one: I should face the worst and let what might come, come," he answered directly. "Let me tell you. In this case I have wished to spare Mrs. Rudyer—for the whole affair is the result of her action without a single word or suggestion of encouragement from me—but she has left me no chance. I must let the truth tell its own tale."

"Ah, that is easy, because the truth helps and doesn't hurt you," answered Godfrey, with some dryness, and a suspicion of contemptuousness in his voice. "But suppose it was the other way about, and

the truth could do no good, and was almost sure to do harm: what then?"

"I should face it just the same," said Dallas. "Apart from all other considerations, it is always best to tell the truth. It pays."

"How could it pay in my case?" returned Godfrey sharply. "How can it clear me from this devil of a woman, without at the same time ruining me with Margery? What chance should I have if she were to know what had passed between me and that beast?" His passion began to rise again.

"Look at the other side, man," answered Dallas quietly. "What possible good can come of trying to hush this up? The woman is absolutely determined that nothing of the kind shall happen. Whatever you do, she means to force an exposure. It's as certain as anything can be that your people will learn the whole affair—and surely you can see that the story had better come from you than from her."

He thought it necessary to drive this home.

"You mean you would advise me to send for my father and Margery, and tell them I have been more than a fool and worse than a scoundrel, while they have thought me absolutely innocent of anything of the kind."

"I mean that if you do not say what has happened, this woman Southerst will do so. In fact, she has begun. You know that she has written to me. She has written also to Miss Allingham hinting at this. She has declared plainly to me that she means to tell all that has happened; and she is quite capable of walking up to the front door, and asking for the cap-

tain, and telling him her own version of all. You know best what the result of that would be."

"Yes, yes, I know. Of course I know. Am I not always thinking of it? Am I not always planning, and plotting, and scheming, and trying to see some way out through the net that holds me on every side?" He began to pace the room again somewhat wildly, waving his hand with much gesticulation. "I feel as a poor devil of a hunted otter must feel when he has managed to slink away to his hole, and knows that one end is stopped with earth, and that the hounds are licking their blood-lusting jaws at the other, while the men are getting ready to smoke him out. There's no escape; not a chance in a thousand, nay, not one in a hundred thousand. Haven't I reasoned it out with myself, day after day, hour after hour? Can't I see as plainly as if it had all happened, the look with which Margery would loathe and avoid me? Can't I read the misery that would come glooming out of my poor, dear father's eyes? Why, he is so miserable now at the mere thought that I am unhappy, that he can't hide his grief even from the servants? Don't I know all this? Haven't I felt it a hundred times? Here's the whole place full of gloomy sadness and wretchedness, and all on my account. It has been so all my life. I was only born to make every one about me miserable, while I myself, God help me, have been the most wretched of all."

He had worked himself up to a frenzy, and at this point he threw himself again into his chair, and sat with one hand pressed to his forehead, muttering now and again, "God help me! God help me!"

Presently he lifted himself on his elbow, and, leaning forward, he looked across at Dallas, who had said nothing, and spoke in a slow, melancholy tone, with none of his former heat and fire.

"You don't know, and you may thank Heaven that you don't, what it is to drag a human soul through life shut up in a twisted carcass such as mine." Dallas made a sign of pain, and seemed as if wishing to check him. 'Let me speak for once freely to somebody. For Heaven's sake let me! All my life I have been a lie to others. I have never dared to tell the truth and to speak what I have really felt. There has never been any one about to whom I could speak. All my life I have longed with passionate eagerness to be as others are, to do what others do, to live as others live; and I am *this*—I have all the feelings, the mind, the pain, the will, the passions, of a man; and I am *this*"—again with a gesture of ineffable contempt he spoke of his physical form. "I can eat, drink, feel, hear, see, order, obey, hate, love; and I am *this*—whatever I do, wherever I go, whatsoever I plan, it has to be with a sense of this miserable, cursed misshape. It follows me as the shadow of the cross dogged the Christ up the hill of Calvary. If I go out, the people point, and stare, and jeer, or pity. If I stay in, they think I shun the very light of day. All round me at all times, in fact or thought, the eyes of the curious, the pitying, the contemptuous, are fixed on me, burning into me, like the eyes of a corpse haunt the brain of a murderer. Do you wonder that I look on life as a hell, and crave for anything and everything that seems to promise relief? Hell, do I say? What hell

could be worse than that of him who, with the brain, the mind, the will, the desires, the passions, the soul and life of a man, finds them dungeoned in such a cursed shape as *this?*"

"You are utterly wrong, and utterly and absolutely without reason. Man is what he does, not what he looks like. You are morbid."

"When you have felt the eyes of a thousand people fixed upon you, half in contemptuous pity, and half in ill-disguised disgust, you will know what I mean. Wait till then. Do you think I don't know what people think and say of me? Haven't I all my life been learning the grammar of such looks? Don't try to foist on me such paltry theories of life. I know and feel and see what people do say and do think. What is it to me what they ought to do or say? Is it any evidence in the favor of a murderer that Moses wrote on that tablet, 'Thou shalt not kill'? I know what people are, not what they ought to be. And I hate them for it! Think, then, if you can, what it meant to me when the first temptation came in the form of that woman. What was I likely to feel when, with an art and a skill which the devil might envy, she made me believe it was for my own sake that she cared for me, that she believed in my power to do something in the world, that she craved me of her own free will; and that I—for whom no one on this earth had ever had a thought undictated by pity—was necessary to her to make her happiness complete? Do you wonder that I yielded? Do you wonder that I saw no snare, that, like the blind, besotted, drunken, glamoured idiot I was, I dreamed I had found the means of filling the

emptiness and crowding out the misery of my life? Curse her for the witch she is!"

His manner had grown in vehemence and his tone in strength till he spoke with intense bitterness.

"And then?" said Dallas, as he stopped.

"And then?" repeated the other. "What could the then be but awakening? She was a liar, and had lied to me. I was her dupe, her fool, her footstool, her jackass—her everything that a man ought not to be, and only a cripple could be. I tried to kill her. God knows I would have done it cheerfully. I longed for her death. I thought of it, planned it, laughed about it, and feasted my eyes with the thought of how, if I could only kill her, I could glut my eyes with the sight of her dead body, and laugh at her death as the proof of my strength. But I couldn't. She saw what I meant, and she is as cunning as she is handsome, and as strong as she is both. She would wait and watch me, without my knowing, and then, when I thought I had her in my power, she would hold me, till all the aggravation of a thousand hells seemed crowding and crushing into my brain, and feelings of impotence would choke every throbbing blood-course in my body, and drive me mad with infuriating, bursting, red-hot passion. And then she would laugh. God, how I hated her for it all! And I wished with all my soul that she would die."

"When was this?" asked Dallas.

"It's two years since we quarreled finally, and I swore I would not go near her again. I have not seen her since, till the other day, when—but I suppose she told you what happened when she taunted me. The

horrible feeling of baffled impotence came over me at the mere sight of her and at her tauntings jeer; and if I could have thrown her over the cliff I would have done it with a feeling of blessed relief. When I am with her, nay, when I even think of her and of the cursed power she wields over me, binding me so that I can neither move nor yet remain still, I feel choked, stifled, and unable to breathe," and as he said this he gasped and put his hand to his throat as if in want of air.

His earnestness and intense realism of suffering were distressing to witness. Hugh Dallas waited some time for him to continue, and then asked:

"What will you do?"

"There is but one thing I can do," he replied, after a pause, speaking in a tone of dull, despairing, mournful resolution. "I am trying to nerve myself for it, but I am a coward. I have seen it coming, getting nearer and nearer; watching the net tighten cord by cord and mesh by mesh. I must die. I had a hope, just a faint, flickering, smoking flax of a hope, which Margery's love kindled. I thought for a while that life could yet be less of a curse, and perhaps almost a blessing, when it seemed to hold her love. But that is gone out at a puff of the other's breath. I might have known that Margery could not love such a thing as I am. Dear Margery; sweet, tender-hearted, gentle Margery. She played the part well enough to deceive me till this last suspicion lighted my eyes. I know now—too well, I know. I am not afraid to die. It isn't fear of death makes me a coward. See, I am always ready"—and he took from a pocket a small bottle and

held it up for Dallas to see. "There is the death of twenty men in that. It is longing for the happiness that can never come which makes me a coward. Death is no enemy of mine. It will be the staunchest friend I have ever had, for it alone can blot out the memories that embitter and the hopes that cheat. Would God that I were dead."

"Do you forget the blow you would strike your father?" said Dallas, seeking to rouse him by any means from his morbid melancholy.

"Forget him?" answered Godfrey reproachfully, looking round. "My poor father! I have never been other than a cause of sorrow to him. Never. He tried to hide it, of course, brave heart that he is. But do you think I don't know what it must be for a man like him to have a cripple for an only son? Why, it would break *my* heart to have one; and his—" he left the sentence unfinished.

"He loves you as sons are rarely loved in this world," said Dallas.

"Ay, as men love broken idols or cling to schemes that have miscarried. If he but hated me, my task would be light enough. The stone would drop into the great pool without a single ripple making its mark on the sands of regret. Poor father. Yet it is kinder to cause him one great pang than to wear away the remnant of his life as I have seen it going gradually in this time of suffering. It is part of the curse that even he who does love me, and those who would love me if they could, only add to the pain of ending all." He sighed deeply, and was silent, bending his head forward in an attitude of the deepest dejection.

For a time it seemed as if the cripple's gloomy despair had infected Dallas himself, for he sat buried in deep thought. Then he made his resolution suddenly.

He jumped up, making an unnecessary noise to rouse the other, and going to him laid his hand on his shoulder and said cheeringly :

"Courage, my friend, courage. I can see a way through all this tangle. Take heart."

"What is it? What will you do?" and the cripple's eye shone for a moment with the light of renewing hope.

"First, give me that bottle."

"No, I will not," answered Godfrey, shaking his head.

"Then I shall take it from you. Come, give it," he said authoritatively.

Slowly and reluctantly the cripple drew it from his pocket, and handed it to Dallas.

"Good. Now, we'll have no more talk of nonsense of this kind," and, opening the window, he poured out the contents, and then threw the bottle away.

"What are you going to do?" asked Godfrey, eagerly following every action with greedy eyes.

"I am going to do what no one has ever done with you yet," answered Dallas, very firmly and yet pleasantly. "I am going to take command of you and your matters, instead of rushing about to try and save you from every draught and chill of trouble. You are going to have what all men in the world have to have at some time or another in their lives—a very bad time of it. I'm going to show you how absolutely silly and

mawkish all this morbid rubbis his that you've been suffering to grow unchecked in your mind, and everybody has helped you to cultivate. You've got yourself into a mess—well, a good many of us have done that before—and you have to get out of it—as we all have. You won't marry Esther Southerst—don't tremble and quiver like that. I know you won't. Well, you can't marry Miss Allingham without the whole thing coming out; therefore, mark this, the whole thing must come out. And I'm going to tell it."

"No, no, no," cried Godfrey, his cry almost a shriek.

"But I say yes," said Dallas firmly. "And I mean it. Here you've sat for an hour and more, just as you've sat alone for days and days, brooding and moping, and seeing nothing ahead but death—either your own or somebody else's."

The cripple shrank and cowered down in his chair at this.

"You see, I've read your thoughts as well as heard your words. Now, the first thing I insist upon is that you think no more about this nonsense of dying. You must give me your word of honor as a man that you will never raise a finger against your life without first letting me know that you wish to recall your promise, and giving me time to get to see you."

The contrast between the cripple's despondent irresolution and Dallas' emphatic vigor was so startling that Godfrey seemed to be carried along by the stronger man's determined will, and he could only offer a faint protest.

"I cannot do that. I could not trust myself."

"Are you a coward to run from the shadow of your own fears?" cried Dallas. "I must have the promise."

"I cannot," repeated the other weakly.

"Then you will drive me to a course which both you and I shall regret. I shall tell the captain what you have threatened to do."

"No, no," cried Godfrey, shrinking back, frightened.

"Do you shrink like that from the mere mention of the deed to him, when you can contemplate striking at him by actually doing it?"

"I will promise," said Godfrey, almost immediately, and he stood up and put out his hand. "I will promise for a time—a month. Would that I had strength like yours," he said, glancing into the other's face, almost like a child or a woman.

"You will have it if you will trust to me. But you will have to find the secret of strength through courage. Dare to be a man, and to do and suffer like a man. Now for the first trial. Who is to tell the captain about Esther Southerst? Nay, nay; don't take your hand away."

He had held the thin, trembling fingers tightly in his while speaking, and felt Godfrey cower and shrink at the question.

"I cannot, I cannot," he murmured.

"Then I will," answered Dallas; "and when he knows all as I know it, you will see how weak you have been in not trusting him before. Now, remember, I am two things to you: first, doctor, to be obeyed to the letter—to the letter; secondly, elder brother, to be trusted, if need be, with every thought of your heart."

He stood by him still holding one hand in his, the other placed affectionately on the dwarf's shoulder, while he looked down kindly into his face.

Gradually the cripple's eyes fell before the calm, firm gaze, and his head sank for an instant. He raised it, looked up at Dallas again and smiled, and murmured: "I will try to do all you tell me." Then hastily and nervously stooping, he kissed the other's hand, and hurried out of the room.

As Dallas glanced at his hand, he saw a tear had fallen on it.

"Poor devil," he murmured; "poor, impressionable, nerveful devil. And now for the captain," and he rang the bell to send for him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Hugh Dallas told the story to the captain cleverly; laying chief insistence upon the woman's influence, and the peculiar strength it would be likely to have upon such a nature as the son's; while he palliated by inference and implication the wrong which Godfrey had done her.

The captain listened to it almost in silence, after the first surprise had drawn from him one or two hasty expressions. And when all had been told, he sat still, thinking it over. The pain and the shame of it burnt like a touch of hot iron on a wound.

"You don't think as lightly of this as you say, Mr. Dallas, and I'm glad you don't, though it's my own son."

Dallas looked up, for the old man's tone was hard and angry.

"I thank you for trying to make the story of shame easy to hear; but even your friendship can't make it easy to bear." He sighed.

Dallas said nothing.

"You've seen this woman, you say?" asked the captain, after a pause.

"Yes, I've seen her—twice."

"I must see her. How can I manage that?"

"I could arrange for her to come to my office."

"That would do. The sooner the better. I'm like a ship in a fog in the channel, beaten right out of my course, with the breeze freshening and the sea rising fast, and the compasses all gone wrong. I'd have trusted that boy's honor—aye, like my own. At present I can only see one point, and I'll steer for it straight as a bird. He shall keep his word and marry the wench." He said this very firmly and deliberately.

"Captain Drury!" exclaimed Dallas, in surprise.

"Well," turning round and looking his companion straight in the eyes, his own gaze steady, clear, and true, "give me your hand. Now, on your word of honor as a man, if you could be placed by any chance in my son's place, what would you do?"

"I don't know what passed between them; but if I had pledged myself to marry her, I should keep my word at any cost."

"Good," said the captain, pressing his hand and wringing it before he let it go. "Good. And would you have my son less honorable than yourself, or than I, his father? I tell you, sir, cried the old man vehemently, "I never broke my word, consciously, in my like; but, thank God, I never pledged it to do a thing I deemed dishonorable. He shall marry her."

After a minute's pause, he started and passed his hand across his face and through his hair. Another thought had struck him.

"Poor Margery! Poor lass! It will be hard for her. She loves the lad; but she must be told. Ah," he sighed deeply, "it isn't only the harm you do to yourself, but what you do to others in a thing like this; like your dirty little foreign barque that gets afire in a

harbor full of fine ships. Poor little Madge," he said again after a long pause, thoughtfully and very sadly.

"It is not for me to argue with you on the subject, nor to attempt to turn you from what you think the right decision," said Dallas, after the two had sat a long time without speaking; "but do you think you are making enough allowance for the deep affection which your son has for Miss Allingham, and the effect upon him?"

"What other course is there consistent with honor?"

"I am not suggesting an alternative course; I am only pointing to a consideration which would be likely to have a serious effect upon such a disposition as your son's."

The old captain thought a moment, and looked inquiringly at Dallas.

"Is there anything behind that question, Mr. Dallas? Anything about Godfrey's disposition?"

Dallas could detect trouble both in the old man's eyes and voice.

"This woman told me the cause of your son's calamity," answered Dallas, very gently and kindly.

"Ah!" The exclamation escaped like a cry of pain. Then he murmured: "I thought no one knew it."

The mention of it seemed to rob him of his strength and self-possession.

"How long have you known this?" he asked, almost piteously and appealingly.

"Only a few hours; but it made me anxious on your son's account. Anxious lest the strain should prove excessive to him."

"I understand—I understand." And the captain closed his eyes, and then covered them with one hand, leaning back on the arm of the chair in painful, silent thought.

"No one knows of this, I think, but the woman herself," said Dallas. "But when I learnt it and heard what an effect all this strain had upon your son, I thought it absolutely necessary that some energetic steps should be taken to end the strain of suspense for him. To know the worst is always less trying than to fear it. But in settling what is to be done, ought not this to be taken into account?"

"She told you that his mother, my poor, poor wife, died insane?" asked the captain.

"Yes."

"Did she tell you what led to the—the accident to the boy?"

"Only so far that he was thrown from some height to the ground."

The captain made no answer for a moment.

"It is my fault, all this—all my fault. I have done wrong," he spoke in a musing, sad tone. "I thought that I could take the tiller and steer the craft better than Providence, I suppose. She was right about my poor wife. For some cause, I never knew what, never could make it out, she got the idea into her head that I had done some sort of wrong with dear Margery's mother. Her poor mad brain must have fed on some scandal or other, though I had not seen my cousin Margery for full five years before the boy's accident. When I left for the last voyage of mine, my wife was as loving and gentle as ever, and when I got back she

was raving mad, and had tried to kill the bairn in her madness. Ah me!" He ended with a deep sigh.

"That secret has been with me all through my life. I brought the child away, cut every association with the place and the past, and came here, to the other side of England. I feared—pray to God, Dallas, you may never have to carry such a fear about with you for any offspring of your loins," he said this with sudden vehemence. "What could I do? The lad was a hopeless cripple, and in his mind, heaven help me, I have always feared to find that mad taint showing itself. I have watched him, nurtured him, almost kept the wind from blowing too keenly on him, prayed over him, and loved him—aye, as only a motherless cripple can be loved by a father whose heart is desolate with ever-gnawing dread of even a worse trouble. God is good," cried the the old man reverently, as he laid his forehead in his hand, "but in my inmost heart at times, I could not help but cry out and rebel.

"Then came a brighter time—again through affliction. My poor cousin's husband was killed suddenly, and the shock was more than she could bear up against. Three months saw them orphaned and almost friendless, and they came to brighten my life. God sent them to save me from despair. I took the gift and laid it to rest in my heart with such a thankfulness as you can scarcely imagine. The flame of life leaped up and burned with a merry blaze for me and warmed me through and through. And it was then, in the years that followed, when all three, Madge and Nan, and Guy, had dropped their anchors right

in the deepest corner of my heart, that the thought first came into my mind."

He smiled very slightly at the reminiscence, and broke off for a moment.

"It was a fanciful idea, but we sailors get into a habit of dreaming at times. The quarter-deck on a fine night when God seems so close overhead makes any man dream. And so I dreamt. I thought that the heavy cloud which had settled down on the course of our vessel, Godfrey's and mine, was meant to be lifted. Poor Madge's mother, thought I, was unconsciously and all innocently the cause of my poor wife's craze and my boy's hard lot; and just as it'll oftentimes happen when the gale is shifting all round the compass, it'll slack off in the very quarter where it's been blowing hardest; so, thought I, it's going to happen now. My little Madge is sent to ease the life which was rendered so hard for my lad through the crazy mistake made about her mother. The more I thought of it, the more the idea held me; till I seemed to see in it altogether the working out of the ways of God's justice. As if we were meant to trace anything of the kind."

He paused again, and was silent for more than a minute, and sighed heavily twice before he resumed.

"Of course, it didn't always seem to go right forward; but then, I would think, can't a ship get forward by tacking? So I kept my eye steadily on the Hope Lightship, and thought of the harbor ahead; you can't sail straight down a shoaly channel. And when I learned that they were in love with one another, I was just as proud as a helmsman who takes his

craft safe through a nasty bit of water in dirty weather. Believe me, Dallas, I never was so happy, and never so thankful to God in my life. I seemed to see then how He'd been trying me, and it looked like the gift from Him of that I longed for above all else. But now—"

He stopped, and shook his head very mournfully, and sighed. Presently he asked :

"You think, do you, that this breaking with Margery will have a bad effect?"

"I can hardly say," replied Dallas. "I think, in regard to him, as with all men of introspective, ruminating natures, that ideas have much greater effects than actual occurrences. He has brooded upon this until I am convinced he has persuaded himself that the rupture of the engagement would be infinite trouble and torture. The apprehension is much greater than the fact would be, and I think if that could be recognized in any line taken it would be best."

"But the engagement must be broken, and he must keep his word to—to that woman. I am resolved at any cost. I will see the woman on Monday. And now, let us say no more. I must go and try to think out what to do, and how to do it. You have behaved like one man in a thousand in all this," said the captain rising ; "I can never repay you."

"Yes, you can, easily," returned Dallas, "by not taking too harsh a view of your son's acts."

They left the room together, and the old man, looking very weary and troubled, turned away to go to his study, to be alone and think, as he said ; in fact, to pray for guidance.

Dallas walked on into the drawing-room. He found

the room empty, and the lights turned low, the windows being open, inviting one out into the soft warm air. He crossed the room, thinking the evening air would refresh him after his long interviews with father and son. The sound of voices arrested him.

"No, you won't."

"Oh, yes, I shall."

"You will do nothing of the kind, Guy."

"Sha'n't? you'll see, Miss Dignity."

"If you do, you'll repent it," in Nan's voice distinctly menacing.

A defiant and irritating chuckle from Guy.

"It's so ridiculous," very emphatically, and with a suppressed laugh of vexation.

"Serves you right. Shouldn't do it."

"Boys are so absurd. As if *you* knew anything about it."

"Well, old Dallas did that morning when I copped you in the rosery. And jolly well you blushed when I told him."

"Old Dallas, indeed. He'd like to hear that."

"Well, he is old, isn't he? I bet he's nearly thirty. But I like him. Don't you?"

"Thirty is not old, except to little boys."

"Look here, Nan, I'll just give you an arm-twister if you cheek me like that. I wouldn't care if it was old Dallas you flirted with instead of that beastly Momerie."

"Guy!"

"It's true. When that fellow moons round you I swear I'd give anything to pinch him or shove a pin into him, or pull his nose."

"You'd better not try it."

"Ho, ho! What could that ass do? I bet I'd give him one in the eye before he'd done fiddling with his collar or pulling up his bags to save 'em from creasing at the knee."

"You're very brave—*now.*"

"I would get spoons on a man, not a tailor's dummy. How does he kiss, eh?" and the boy guffawed loudly.

"Guy, how dare you say such a thing?"

"Ha, ha! Fetched you there, young woman. But, look here straight. Nan, if you marry that little barber's block, I'll lead him such a life. I won't even speak to you, or see you either. I won't give my consent either. So there!"

"Dear me, I hope your majesty won't be too hard."

"Well, anyway I'm head of the family—of our family."

"Yes, it's always the smallest bough at the top of the tree. Perhaps your royal highness will draw up a list of suitors for your humble and docile sister."

"Yes; you can marry Don, if you like. I should like that. And I don't mind Mr. Dallas."

"What a nice list. One of them a boy in his teens, still being whipped at school if he doesn't do his lessons; and the other engaged to be married to a guest in your majesty's house. You're scarcely a tactician yet, boy."

Hugh Dallas thought it was time to move out of earshot; and wished he hadn't stopped to hear so much.

He went out by another door on the opposite side of

the house, and then walked round to the terrace in time to hear Guy finish some speech with a laugh, to which Nan replied :

"Mr. Dallas is nothing to me, and you know it," and this speech fell by no means pleasantly on his ears.

"There, now you've put your foot in it deep enough," cried Guy, laughing. "Here he is. I hope you heard that, Mr. Dallas. Nan has an awfully bad habit of saying rude things loud enough for others to hear."

Then an irresistible impulse seized Dallas ; and he answered :

"Yes, *old* Dallas heard it."

At this the boy laughed and exclaimed. "Oh, crikey, he's heard everything," and then ran off.

Then Dallas turned to Nan, who had drawn back into the shade of the house.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"Was that a formal renunciation of an old ally, Miss Nan?" asked Hugh Dallas. "If so, I am sorry I overheard it."

"It was not meant for your ears," answered Nan, who had sat down again on the garden seat, where she had been sitting with Guy. "But you heard a good deal of—of Guy's nonsense. He is very trying in his teasing moods."

She was trying to recall what she might have said, and how far given him cause for offense; she was speculating also as to how much he could have heard.

"Yes, his tongue has a sharp point—especially when he gets near the truth."

"He is so absurd," said Nan, vaguely uncomfortable at this. "He's the last person with whom one holds conversations which one wants overheard."

"No; he seems to draw uncomfortable admissions," said Dallas, laughing.

Nan felt herself blushing, and thanked the dusk for hiding it; and then resolved to attack under cover of the darkness.

"What did you overhear, Mr. Dallas?"

"I can't see your face, Miss Nan, but your voice suggests blushing," replied Dallas. "I unfortunately overheard much more than was intended for my ears,

I am afraid—particularly your defense of me against the charge of old age, and of Mr. Momerie against the indictment of general unpleasantness."

"That dreadful boy!" exclaimed Nan, now really annoyed and conscious that she had said a good many things not for overhearing.

A very awkward silence followed.

"If I was—was hurried into saying—anything that—that grieved you—or pained you—I am sorry," said the girl, in a very quiet voice and with none of her customary sprightliness. "You have done so much for us."

"I only heard a scrap of conversation in which Guy was talking a lot of nonsense and you were very rightly rebuking him—as an elder and dignified sister should. He seems to object to your—friend, Mr. Momerie."

"Mr. Dallas!" exclaimed Nan.

"And I should think he could embody his objections in a very strong practical form."

"Have you any more news about Godfrey, Mr. Dallas? That is a much more important matter than Guy's stupidity."

"More important than Mr. Momerie?" he returned.

"Really, Mr. Momerie is nothing to me."

"Ah, that is what you said about me just now. Do you want to hear any news?"

Dallas could have kicked himself. Here he had just such an opportunity as he might have asked for to set himself right with the girl—and he was using it to talk a lot of maundering rubbish likely to do him more harm than good in her eyes.

"I have been waiting anxiously ever since you came."

"Are we allies?" he asked. "As we used to be?"

"I don't understand—yes—no—well, I suppose so."

Both were silent.

Then Dallas spoke.

"I don't know that this is the best spot to speak of these things. Accidentally, I overheard more than was good for me," this with a laugh. "Would you mind walking a few paces in the grounds?"

He was nervous, and his voice shook; and the sympathy of nervousness spread to the girl.

"Yes," she said, very quietly, and rose.

Then there was a rustling of a dress behind them in the room, and a door was closed noisily, as if for effect.

The two moved away together, and Mrs. Rudyer came out directly, and walked after them.

"Hugh," she said, in a tone intended to suggest that she was both astonished and reproachful. "Is that you, dear, with Nan? I have been looking for you."

Hugh Dallas bit back an angry word that rose to his lips, and turned and faced her.

She had chosen her time injudiciously. He was angered at the interruption, and believed she had been listening to them for some time. Moreover, his faculties had been at high tension during the interviews with Godfrey and his father, and he was thus more easily moved than usual.

"There was no more reason for you to look for me, Mrs. Rudyer, than for you to use my Christian name."

"Oh, you are too ridiculous, Hugh. I shall really be angry. It is absurd that you won't call me Bee—as you have fifty thousand times—nor let me call you, Hugh, just because of some fancied notions about etiquette. Isn't it ridiculous, Nan?" and the little widow appealed to the girl with an airy laugh.

"I know nothing about it," said Nan hastily, and with confusion. 'Please excuse me, Mr. Dallas, I must run in now. I—want to speak to Margery."

"I should much prefer you to stay," answered Dallas.

"No, no, Hugh. Let her go in; run in, dear," said Mrs. Rudyer. "Besides, I want to speak to Mr. Dallas."

"Wait," said Dallas, sternly enough now. "You force me"—addressing Mrs. Rudyer—"to take an exceedingly distasteful course. You leave me no alternative. For your own purposes, you have spread a report here—I have heard it to-night from Mr. Godfrey Drury, and have denied it—that there is some sort of engagement between us by which I am pledged to marry you. No one knows better than yourself that that is absolutely without the slightest foundation. On the strength of this ridiculous absurdity, you have attempted to compromise yourself and me in several ways, and to-night you have just intervened when I have something of a confidential nature to say to Miss Nan. You will, therefore, please to excuse us. Now, Miss Nan, I will tell you that," and he turned from Mrs. Rudyer to continue the walk with Nan.

The widow was a clever tactician, saw at once that she had made a mistake, and covered it bravely.

"Ah, you have one of your headaches coming on, dear, I expect. You should have said you wanted to speak to Nan. Of course I don't mind *her*. But don't catch cold, Hugh. I'll get you your hat." And humming a tune lightly, she turned back into the house, feeling bitterly angry and humiliated and vowing vengeance—against Nan.

What stung her was that Nan had been present and had stayed to listen.

Nan, on her side, secretly rejoiced at the widow's fall; but was deceived and puzzled by the effect which had been produced on her. At the same time, she was nervous and upset, and by no means inclined to continue the interview with Dallas; and almost as soon as Mrs. Rudyer had gone into the house, she pleaded a chill and went in by another way.

"Hang the woman!" exclaimed Dallas angrily, as soon as he was alone and had lighted a cigarette. "I'm glad I gave it to her, although I did feel a bit of a bully in making it quite so strong. But how she faced up at the end. She was biting her heart-strings, I'll bet; but she managed to pop a smile on to gull Nan with. Dear little girl, I'm glad she knows the truth." Then, after half a cigarette had been puffed away, "Hang that fellow Momerie! Wonder if she was taking his side in earnest when Guy was chaffing her?" Then, as he lighted a fresh cigarette, "Wonder what effect it'll have on Nan? Shall watch for that carefully."

But he had little or no chance to observe any effect. The morning brought him letters from Middlingham making his return that day imperative; and after he had had a short conversation with the captain and with

Godfrey, arranging with the former for the interview with Esther Southerst, and cheering up the son so far as practicable, he went over to Garthorne to see Alan, and from there he went home without returning to the Manor House. Monday morning brought him a very short note from Mrs. Rudyer, which he read eagerly.

"My Dear Hugh,—I am sorry you tried to humiliate me before Nan, but you might have known me better than to think you would succeed. You have driven me to take stronger measures than I had wished to do; but it was necessary to clear up any lingering doubts there might be in Nan's mind. You should not have forced me to protect myself against your unkindness and cruelty in this way. I love you so much that it has pained me to think that you should be compromised in the opinion of others even for such a cause. Ever as ever. "Bee."

"'Compromised,' 'compromised,' what the deuce is the woman driving at?" he mused angrily. "By Jove, I'll soon settle that. I'll send Alan—stay, should I, just now? No. Confound the woman, she's got me this time. Wait an instant—what an ass I am! The very thing. I'll write to Godfrey; set him to work confidentially. It'll do him good to have something to do."

He wrote a hurried letter referring to what he had told Godfrey during their interview, telling him briefly of the incident, and enclosing the widow's letter for him to find out what it meant and let him know.

"That's checkmate, I hope," he said. "And now

for this bothering matter of the frauds," and he plunged into his work and kept at it for four hours.

The appointment was fixed for three o'clock, and shortly before the time Captain Drury arrived, looking very anxious and worn, but yet decided.

"I've made up my mind what I shall do," he said, after they had shaken hands. "I've thought over all you said, but it has not shaken my resolve. Unless there is some great reason against it, he shall make her his wife at any cost."

"You shall see her first before I say anything," replied Dallas.

"My mind is made up," answered the captain, and then lapsed into silence.

Punctually to the moment Esther Southerst arrived, and when Dallas glanced at her, he was astonished at the difference in her looks.

She was dressed with even more scrupulous neatness than before and in her manner there was not a trace of that reckless, devil-may-care, jaunty air which she had shown on each of the previous occasions. She came in with her veil down, her hands folded in front of her, her eyes downcast, and a demure, humble, ill-used expression on her face.

"She knew the old man was to be here," thought Dallas, with a tendency to smile. "She'll deceive him."

The captain rose when she entered, bowed to her with grave courtesy, and placed a chair for her.

She sat down, and then, after a deep and very audible sigh, turned to Dallas and asked in a low voice:

"You wished to see me?"

"It was at my desire that Mr. Dallas wrote to you,"

said old John plunging at once into the middle of the subject. "You know who I am?"

"You are Godfrey's—Mr. Godfrey's father," was the reply.

"I want you to tell me the whole story of your relations with my son," said the captain. "Can you do this?"

"It is very painful to me to speak of it," said the woman, in a tone of great respect.

Dallas recalled how she had spoken of it before, and again he buried a smile in his mustache.

"I am sorry to pain you," answered the captain, "but it is very important that I should hear it."

"I have been wrong, very wrong," she answered, with a sigh, while she took out her handkerchief and held it in her hand, lightly touching first her lips and then her eyes as she spoke. "But I have suffered deeply. I loved your son, sir, and trusted him entirely with my whole heart and soul." She fixed her large lustrous eyes on the captain's face as she said this, while her voice faltered. "He deceived me, Captain Drury, and when I had given him all the proofs of my love that a woman can give, and, God help me, more than any honest woman can give, he left me, with almost a curse on his lips. We were to have been married, but he said he dared not marry me because of your anger; but I knew of you, and I knew you would not have thought it shame that he should keep the pledge he had given me. I told him this, urged it upon him with all the power of a wronged woman. But he left me."

"Poor lass!" said the captain when she stopped.

This was spoken and acted with consummate skill, and made an evident impression on him. So much so that Dallas interposed.

"You were not affected in this way when you were here before. Your manner was very different."

"Ah," she cried quickly, and cleverly turning the interruption to her own use, "there are times when my heart is all bitterness, recklessness, fire, and anger; when the sense of sorrow is lost in the memory of injustice; when I am more of an outraged woman than a miserable, forsaken wife. It was in one such moment that in a fit of desperation I tracked your son to his home," she cried, with a touch of wildness in her manner, "and sought to bring home to him the sense of what he had done by flinging myself into the sea almost at the gates of his rich house. But they would not let me die," and she let her hands fall on her lap with a gesture of despair, while a look of infinite melancholy rested on her face.

And in this way, with consummate art, sometimes implying much in a few words, now hinting at things too dark to be mentioned, then dwelling upon isolated incidents, and facts which made in her favor, she told what seemed to be a story of almost heartless cruelty and desertion as the reward of implicit faith and abounding love.

More than once when Dallas interposed some question, intended to bring out the complete contrast between her manner then and on previous occasions, she was quick to convert the questions to her advantage by some ready and plausible explanation.

"Why have you done nothing for so long a time?" he asked.

"I have waited, hoping that his heart would soften," she replied readily. "And I should have waited longer, but I heard of his intended marriage. Then my woman's pride forced me to interfere."

It was a good answer, well calculated to touch the man for whom it was designed.

"Was it your woman's pride which induced you to write anonymous letters?" asked Dallas.

"I sought to rouse him first indirectly in all that I wrote," and as she said this she directed a quick, furtive look at her questioner which dared him, as plainly as any words could have done, to go further in that direction.

"How did you get your information?" asked Dallas declining to take up the challenge.

"How could any woman fail to learn the facts about the man she loved?" was the reply, humbly spoken.

"It is enough, Mr. Dallas. I will see you righted," he said, turning to Esther Southerst and holding out his hand.

Then she surpassed herself.

She rose from her chair, took his hand in both hers, gasped hysterically once or twice as if in want of air, and then, pressing her lips to it, she sunk on her knees before him, and bursting into a storm of tears she clung to him with nervous, trembling fingers and cried:

"Oh, thank God—thank God!"

The captain was too much affected to do more than pat her shoulder and smooth her hand, and beg her not to kneel to him, while his own honest eyes filled with tears of real distress.

CHAPTER XXX.

On the evening of the day of the interview with Esther Southerst, Godfrey Drury sat alone in the small inner library of the Manor House. It was a snug, cosy room, but in the deepening shades of the evening it seemed dull and gloomy. Not a breath of wind stirred. Outside was heavy and hot, and a mist had come up from the sea, which clung round the trees and bushes and hung about the house. There was an unwonted resonance in the air, too, suggestive of a brooding storm. The stillness was intense, and the cripple felt oppressed by it, although he himself had frightened away those who had gone to him by his moody temper. He was waiting. Very little had passed between him and the captain on the subject of Esther Southerst, but it had been enough to rouse in him both passion and fear.

"You know, of course, what Mr. Dallas had to tell me," the captain had said on the Sunday. "I am going to-morrow to Middlingham to see—her." He paused before the pronoun, scarce knowing how to speak of Esther Southerst. "I will speak to you when I return."

"What do you want to see her for?" Godfrey had asked sharply.

"To hear her story and make my decision."

"She will lie to you ; but there, I don't care, she is nothing to me." And then he had turned away, as if indifferent.

But he knew his father well, and knew that the story he would hear would make a deep impression. During the whole of the Sunday he had brooded over it, and all night it had kept him restless, sleepless, and agitated, and all the following day he had been nervously excited. A sense of impending calamity was so strong upon him that he was like one dazed or crazed. He could neither eat nor drink, rest nor move about, bear to have any one with him nor endure solitude. The only person who could have calmed him at all was Margery. When she was away from him he longed for her to be near ; yet when she came he drove her away with harsh words, maddened at the thought that he had lost her forever as the consequence of his acts.

All day he had stayed in the small room, except when once or twice he had rushed out into the air with a sensation as of a man choking. But he had gone back to the room again, filled with angry distemper at the mocking sense of happiness in which the sunshine had seemed to laugh at him. He hated everything that seemed to suggest happiness ; and when once or twice the sound of Guy's or Nan's laughter had been borne in to him, it had moved him almost to a frenzy of passion. When the dusk began to gather, and the mist came up, thick and dark and clinging, he was glad, for it drove the others into the house. Then Margery came to him for the third or fourth time since luncheon.

"Are you feeling better, Godfrey?" she asked.

"No."

"I am sorry. I wish you would let me get you something. You have had nothing to eat all day. What is the matter, dear?"

"Never mind."

"We are going to have a cup of tea. Won't you come?"

"No."

"Godfrey, something is making you unhappy. Tell me." She sat down by his side, and took his hand. "How cold you are. You are not well."

He snatched his hand away, almost roughly.

"Go away."

"I want to be with you, dear. I can't bear to be away and to think of you sitting in this dreary room alone and ill."

"I'm not ill. Go away."

She sighed.

"Ah, Godfrey, don't send me away," she said entreatingly. "Let us get a light and cheer the room up a bit, and have a snug cup of tea, and then read a bit together and have one of our old-fashioned chats." And she smiled very pleasantly and rose and rang the bell.

"Can't I be alone when I will?" he cried angrily; and then his tone changed suddenly. "You'll be glad enough to leave me soon." And he turned from her to the window and gazed out at the mist, sullenly and very sorrowfully. His own words had saddened him.

Just then the servant came in answer to the bell.

"Some tea, Rose, and bring some matches," said

Margery. And as soon as the maid had gone she went to him and placed her arm round him.

"What is behind that, Godfrey? There has something happened—I know there has. I saw it yesterday and to-day, both with uncle and you. If it is bad news why am I to be shut out from helping to bear it? Tell me," She spoke gently and affectionately.

"Bad news. Good news you'll call it, I expect."

The words came almost against his will. He did not mean them; but they were an echo of the moody anger that possessed him. He was angry with himself for having spoken them, and with Margery for having drawn them from him.

"When has bad news to you and uncle been good news to me?" she said, with a gentle reproach; but he had wounded her. "You are cruel, Godfrey—cruel."

"Why do you come bothering me, then? Wait till you hear what has to be heard," he cried, his moodiness changing to violent anger. "Heaven knows, ill news flies quickly enough without—"

The servant knocked at the door at that moment, and interrupted Godfrey in the middle of the speech.

"Don't light that gas," he cried wrathfully; "and take those slops away," pointing to the tea.

The servant hesitated, not knowing what to do; and compromised matters by putting down on the table the matches with which she had been about to light the gas, and going hurriedly out of the room, leaving the tea-tray.

"Can't I be obeyed by a single servant?" he cried, eager to find some one or something on whom to vent

his anger. "Have they all been set against me already? By G—, I won't stand that. Here, you, come back," he called to the maid, opening the door of the larger library, through which she had passed.

But she either did not or would not hear, and what in his excited anger he deemed an act of flagrant disobedience, wrought up his passion to such a pitch that he seized the tray, and hurled it, with all that was on it, with all his force in the direction in which the servant had gone.

"Now," he cried, turning to Margery, who was pale and frightened, "will you go and leave me alone or stay till I go mad? A parcel of disobedient devils."

The girl fled in terror, and the cripple slammed the door after her, and locked it, and began pacing the little room from side to side with quick, nervous, angry tread.

His passion passed as suddenly as it had come.

Pausing in his walk in the middle of the room, he pressed his clenched hands to his forehead, and looked about him, as he might have done had he been awakened from a sound sleep; and then, with a gesture of passionate despair, he threw himself at full length on a couch, and cried, in a voice of grief:

"My God, my God! what have I done?"

He lay still like one in a stupor for a long time, till the dusk had deepened into dark; and then getting up, he groped his way to the door, opened it, and went out full of miserable remorse to seek Margery and make his peace with her.

When he reached the hall, he found the captain had arrived, and the latter started in surprise and pain at

Godfrey's white, scared face, disheveled appearance and worn, anxious, miserable look, and spoke kindly to him.

The two girls were fussing over the captain, and making much of him, as women like to with those they love, Margery helping him to get off his greatcoat, while Nan took his stick and hat and gloves; then each thrust an arm through his, and were marching him off to the room where they had taken care to have some tea and cakes ready for him, when Margery slipped to Godfrey.

"You'll come now, Godfrey, won't you?" she asked.

"Come here, Margery," and he drew her into the shade of the library. "Can you forgive me?" he whispered. "I am miserable; and I—oh, Margery, if you could only know what this will mean to me. Can you forgive me?"

Not having the clue to his thoughts, she was puzzled, and did not understand his seeming inconsequence.

"I was much to blame myself, dear," said Margery gently, laying her cool fingers on his brow to smooth it as if he were a child. "I angered you; but I wanted to rouse you from your melancholy.

"Ah, Margery," he whispered, with a sigh, "you are an angel."

"Clogged with very earthly thoughts, I am afraid," she answered lightly. "That was a very womanish meddlesomeness, for instance, which wouldn't let me leave you alone this afternoon, made you excited, and caused all this upset."

He had taken her hand and held it a minute without

speaking, and he pressed it in his own fingers, which were trembling.

"Will you kiss me, dear," he said, "and let me kiss you?"

She bent her head down, and he threw his arms round her neck, almost convulsively, and kissed her passionately, and laid his cheek against hers. She felt it was cold and wet with tears.

"Margery," he said, in a whisper, "shall you be glad to have our engagement broken?"

He held her so tightly that he almost hurt her, and she felt the muscles of his arms stiffen and grow rigid as if in a great effort at self-control. She was conscious of this, despite the astonishment which his question caused.

"You are full of strange fancies to-night, dear. Why should the engagement be broken? You have been brooding till you have made yourself miserable. Let us go to uncle."

"No, no, not for a minute! Sit here a minute. Do, do, for heaven's sake!"

He pleaded with such fervor and eagerness—so exaggerated and so unnecessary as it seemed to her—that Margery yielded. And when she sat down on a low chair, he knelt beside her and put his arms again round her neck.

"Tell me, Margery, do tell me. Shall you be glad?"

"Do you wish to break it, Godfrey?" asked Margery, not knowing at all what he meant.

"Great heavens, no!" burst from him, with such violent feeling that no one could mistake its sincerity,

while, as he spoke, he took one arm from her neck and then laid his head on her bosom, with his forehead nestling close to her cheek.

"Then why ask what could only distress me even to think of?" was the girl's answer.

"Because I am longing to hear you utter words of love. You will know soon why I asked," and he shuddered. "But to-night, here now—I am faint for words of love. Do you love me, Margery?"

"Are we not soon to be man and wife? I have always loved you," she said, and smoothed his forehead, and then bent her face forward and kissed the brow.

"Madge, would you kiss me if I were dying?"

"I shall scold you, sir, if you keep on brooding."

"Don't," he cried, as if the tone and the words jarred. "Would you? Suppose"—a long pause—"suppose I had—no, we— Suppose something *should* ever happen to come between us, and I were dying—would you kiss me like that?"

"What is in your mind to-night to make your thoughts so sad, dear? We should be talking of marriage bells—I what I must be married in; you where we are to go for our honeymoon. I will not let you run on gloomy subjects in this way," she said, in this way striving to rouse him.

"Ah, you are happy, Margery. It is easy not to think of death when your heart is light. But to-night I have a fancy—put it no higher than a fancy, if you will. I feel that if I held your hand in mine, and if your lips were on my brow, I could open that gate of gloom myself, and close it behind me with a resolute

hand, shutting out forever the light of life. If there is anything beyond, I know my spirit would carry that last memory of you into the wilderness of eternity. If there is nothing beyond, I should have been cheered to the last by a sense of all you seem to be to me."

"Open the gate yourself, Godfrey. What do you mean?" asked Margery.

"That if I could have died just now when you laid your cool lips on my hot brow, I should have welcomed death."

"I will not stop for you to harbor sad thoughts like this," said Margery. "Let us go to the others."

"Stay," he said entreatingly; "I am happy. I will speak no more of death." She stayed. "Have you ever thought how seldom, during the whole time we have been engaged, you have spoken of love? I have told you of mine many times, but you have always seemed to try and make me *feel* you loved me, without using words. I think that is right. Yet sometimes, do you know, I have seemed to hunger for the mere words—as I do to-night. I should like to tell you something to-night, and to ask you a question that I have never ventured to ask before."

"What is that?" asked Margery, when he paused.

"Did ever care for Alan Ramsay? Ah, that has made you start in surprise; and your heart is beating faster. I can feel it throbbing."

"Why do you ask a question like that, Godfrey?" and her voice was unsteady as she spoke.

"Because they tried to make me think you did. They told me—what do you think?" he laughed,—

"that you loved Alan Ramsay, and were marrying me for money. As if that were a story any one who knew you would believe for a moment. You, to marry for money." He laughed again at the absurdity. "Did you ever care for Alan Ramsay?"

"Who are 'they' who try to make mischief?" asked Margery.

"Liars, Madge; base, venomous, reckless liars," he burst out, with sudden anger, as he thought of Esther Southerst.

"Then let us put their slanders away from you. You are right, Godfrey. If I did not love a man well enough to marry him, no wealth, nor land, nor honors could tempt me to marry him."

"I knew that. I was sure of it," and he kissed her. Then after a long silence, during which he nestled his head on her bosom, he said, "If anything should ever come between us, Margery—if it should, I say—could you ever care enough for Alan Ramsay to—to marry him?"

"Nothing ever will come between us, Godfrey."

"But suppose it should, what then?"

"But suppose I hadn't a foolish Godfrey who was trying how uncomfortable he could make himself, and was manufacturing riddles about all sorts of absurdities, and suppose—"

"Don't," he said, in a tone of entreaty. "I want to know. If I were dead, Margery, would you marry Alan Ramsay?"

"You promised to speak no more about death," said the girl.

"You are trying to evade the question," he cried

quickly and suspiciously, lifting his head from her bosom. "I could feel your heart leap with a quick rush of alarm. Tell me, Margery."

At that moment a door opened, and Nan came singing across the broad hall, and peered into the library.

"Marge! Godfrey!" she called, in a loud whisper.

"What is it, Nan?" asked Margery, while Godfrey rose to his feet.

"Uncle wants Godfrey. I told him I thought he was in the sanctum"—this was the inner library—"and he's coming directly. I slipped out to let you know. I guessed."

"It's all right, dear," said Margery. "Godfrey and I have been—have been chatting."

"So I thought," said Nan, with a significant sniff; "but uncle didn't seem to like it; and I'm sure *he* won't care about sitting in the dark."

With that the two girls went in together and lit the gas in the sanctum, and then Nan whispered:

"Something serious has happened, Madge. I think it's about Godfrey."

There was no time for more, as they heard the captain's slippered feet crossing the hall.

"Is Godfrey there?" he asked, seeing the girls in the inner room.

"Yes, here I am," answered the cripple.

"Dear little heart," said the old man, taking Margery in his arms as they met, and kissing her. His face was very grave and sad, and his manner very loving and tender to her. Then he held her a moment at arm's length, putting his hands on her shoulders, and

kissed her once more as he repeated his word caress—"Dear little heart."

After that he went into the room where Godfrey was, and closed the door behind him.

The cripple had gone quite to a corner of the room by the side of the fireplace, and sat in a large, roomy, lounge chair, with his face half turned from the door. He looked round once when the captain came in, but it was a quick, stealthy glance, and almost immediately he turned his head away again, avoiding the captain's eyes, and kept his own fixed on the plants which stood in and about the grate.

The old captain paused a few seconds looking at Godfrey, and a slight expression of dissatisfaction crossed his face at the way in which Godfrey received him. Then he went and stood by his chair, resting one hand on the back of it.

"You know where I have been, and whom I have been to see. I have seen Esther Southerst, and have heard the whole of her story."

"She is a liar, remember that," said Godfrey, not looking at him.

"She says you ruined her, and left her."

"She lies. She ruined me, and drove me from her."

"Did you promise her marriage?" asked the captain, not without sternness in his voice.

Godfrey made no answer.

"Did you promise her marriage; yes or no?"

"Yes."

"Are you and I—father and son—men of honor?"

"You are. I am as crippled in honor as in body."

"Silence, Godfrey. Don't palter with your con-

science. Have you any doubt as to what my decision is?"

He waited for an answer, but none came.

"No, you can have none. You have passed your word; on the faith of it this woman trusted you; and if you are my son, you will keep it."

"Do you mean that you think I can make that woman my wife?" cried Godfrey, looking up almost wildly into his father's face.

"I do," answered the captain.

"Never, never," exclaimed the cripple vehemently. "I could not do it. I would rather die—infinitely rather," and he turned in his chair and shuddered.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THERE came a long silence, during which the captain paced the room as if it had been the quarter-deck. After a time he stopped, and went close to the chair in which Godfrey sat; and leaning against the library table, and putting his hands in the pockets of his jacket, he began to speak deliberately.

"We must talk this thing out together, lad," he said, "like men of honor. You must see it as I see it, and I'll try to understand how you look at it. We shall get soundings then."

"You don't know what you are asking," murmured Godfrey.

"Listen here, lad. You gave your word to this girl that you'd marry her, and you took advantage of the confidence with which that pledge of yours filled her— Bide a bit," as Godfrey was going to speak. "Now, when a man pledges his word, I hold he's bound to keep it, fair weather or foul. What a man says he'll do, I hold him bound to do, unless he's released, either by the other, or by peculiar circumstances, and then only if the other will suffer no harm. But that don't apply here. Things can't be put back as they were before this promise was given. And that's the point. If you pass your word to do anything, no matter what, on condition that somebody else will do something, and they do it, then you're

bound to keep your word. If you don't do it, then you've no right to mix with honest men."

"But supposing you're deceived and tricked into making a promise, what then?"

"Why, you must go through with it," answered the old man readily and bluntly. "No man has a right to mortgage his honor in order to clothe his folly. Would you have a man chop his helm off to carve a new figure-head out of it. The time to think of consequences was when you were enjoying the price of your promised honor. Not now, lad; it's too late."

"Think what she is and who she is," said Godfrey.

"Shame on you, Godfrey, for such a thought as that!" cried the captain. "On God Almighty's deck we're all steerage passengers. There's no saloon and first and second class, with its dainty bits for this one, and its rough fare for another. And the want of class and caste that's good enough for God, please Him, shall be always good enough for me, aye, and good enough for mine too. Do you think that the wealth which alone marks me off from the humblest fisherman in Seacove is given to me by God that I may buy His favor with it? The difference between you and Esther Southerst is not that you are rich and she poor, but that she is wronged, and you have wronged her. For that, money is no excuse; it's an aggravation of a coward's act."

Godfrey made no reply; and the captain after a pause said:

"You see now—for my code's simple enough—why I say you must keep your word. Why do you refuse?"

"I hate her," answered the cripple.

"Dishonor can't sail under the colors of hate. Your duty is to do her justice."

"She set her snare to catch me, not I her," was the reply.

"What was in *your* thoughts when you deceived her?"

"She threw herself at me and lied to me."

"And you opened your arms to catch her and lied to her," replied the captain sternly. "How do you say she deceived you?"

"She made me think her love was genuine. That she cared for me and wanted me for myself," he laughed scornfully.

"Well?" asked the captain.

"You have seen her, haven't you?" returned Godfrey, looking round. "She is a liar, a cunning, devilish, hateful liar; and cares as much for me—as I do for her," with a bitter laugh. "We should make a pleasant, loving couple."

"A laugh like that sounds to me like the grating of a good ship's keel on a sunken reef. Godfrey, if you have a spark of manliness or honor in you, you will make this woman the only reparation in your power."

"My dear father, you don't know the woman. I do. You have seen her once with the mask on her face, and gloves on her hands. I have seen her fifty times, without either mask or gloves; and I tell you she's a devil. She's deceived you, as she deceived me. Give her money; five hundred, a thousand pounds—nay, half of all the money you would ever think of leaving to me—but don't ask me to marry her unless—" and

his voice sank to a tone of deadly earnest—"you want to see me hanged for wife murder; for as sure as there's a sky above us I should take her life within half a year."

"Godfrey, what are you saying?" cried the old man.

"The truth—the truth only. Did she tell you that I've tried it twice? Once when I waited day after day with stealthy eagerness; and once, recently, when I met her on the cliff. Would to Heaven I had done it, too. But she's a devil. She knew what I meant, and laughed at me. Heavens, it makes me mad with lust for her life when I think of it," he exclaimed passionately.

The captain could say nothing. His face had blanched to a deathly pallor and the beads of perspiartion stood on his forehead, till he wiped them away with a trembling hand.

He had never expected anything like this, and it roused into activity all his fears for his son's sanity.

"Is this true?" he murmured, after a time.

"Ask Esther Southerst herself," replied Godfrey bluntly. "You seem to doubt my word."

"No, no, my boy. I don't. What then—what will you do?"

Astonishment, pain, and fear had driven all thoughts of sternness and authority out of his mind. The positions seemed almost reversed. It was the cripple who was now the master of the position.

He did not reply directly, but sat thinking intently, pressing his face upon the back of his hand. Then he looked up in the captain's face and saw the paleness

and the expression of anguish on it ; and his love for the old man moved him to softness.

"Father, I have frightened you," he said, and he put his long, white fingers on the captain's arm, "and I fear I have sadly disappointed you. I know how you prize our good name—and I have shamed it. If I could marry this woman, I would, for your sake ; but I dare not, I dare not. Evil would come of it. You must find some other way. I am sorry." As he finished, he bent his head forward and leant it against the hand which rested on the captain's arm.

They were both silent, until the captain, making a great effort, said, in a voice which was very uneven :

"Who will break this to poor Margery ?"

The cripple started and trembled, but did not look up, and made no attempt to answer.

"Godfrey, you will have to play the man in this. Will you tell her, or shall I ?" said the captain.

"Must she be told ?" asked the other, standing up and looking suddenly with an expression of imploring entreaty and eager suspense in his face that stabbed the captain's heart.

He waited a minute, returning his son's gaze steadily, and then, drawing his right hand from his pocket, he laid it on his shoulder. When he answered, his voice was quite clear, and his manner quite firm again.

"Godfrey, lad, you can never marry Margery."

The cripple trembled at the words till he seemed to shrink away from the old man's grasp. He looked appealingly into his eyes, and his own dropped before the steady decision he saw in his father's face. He passed his tongue over his dried, almost whitened

lips, and then bit the under lip until the blood nearly came.

"I have been waiting for those words all day, and fearing them," he said, in a voice dry and husky, and scarcely louder than a whisper. "Must it be so?"

"Could you marry her while, in God's sight, you have a wife now? You have pleaded to be released from your pledge because you fear to do murder. Could you stand beside another at the altar with a perjured pledge between you?"

"Margery need not know," he said, casting furtive glances about as if in search of some respite from what he feared. Anything to save him from losing Margery.

"Would you deceive her as you deceived the other?" asked the captain very sternly.

"No; but she would be true to me. She loves me. She will forgive me. See, father, I will do anything, give anything to stave off this. I cannot bear even to think of it. All day I have been thinking of it, till I swear I am like a madman. You don't know what Margery's love is to me. You cannot know. You cannot think how life glooms before me without her. I am not like other men. They are strong and active: they have resources to which they can fly, and find in their physical strength some help, distraction, and medicine for the mind. I cannot do this. I have nothing but Margery, and if you take her from me I shall die. Ah! I would not live without her. Nay, by Heaven! I will not."

"Godfrey," said the old man again sternly. "Your life is not yours, but God's."

"What care I for that?" cried the cripple desperately.

"What is God to me if He robs me of Margery? I do not want His life. I hate it. It is no gift, but a curse. I fling it back to Him. It is worse than nothing to me."

"Boy, boy, you break my heart with this wild blasphemy!" cried the captain in distress. "It is not God, but your own wicked deed that stands between you and Margery."

"Yes, yes, I know," answered the cripple, recalled to some self-restraint by his father's outburst and grief. "I will try to be quieter. I will try to bear it. It may not be for long. I have seen it coming."

He sighed heavily, and, sitting down again in his chair, he clasped his hands, interlocking the fingers tightly, and pressing them between his knees, then drew his body forward, and with bent head he rocked himself to and fro in anguish so manifest that the captain's heart bled for him.

"Father, I can bear no more to-night," he said, rising quickly. "I have done wrong—a cruel wrong, it may be, but I am suffering enough punishment now. Good-night."

And he left the room, and, passing through the hall and up the wide staircase with quick, nervous footsteps, lest any one should meet and intercept him, he fled to his own room. There, locking the door, he cast himself in the dark on to his bed, and lay prone, shaken by a passion-tempest of awful despair.

His distress was aggravated much by his own morbid imaginings, which left him with absolutely no spot or flick of light in a future which was bereft of Margery. This had been always the habit of his mind.

Whatever he desired for the moment was all in all to him—whatever was threatened to be taken from him became the one possession of all that had any value for him.

In Margery's case, this feeling was intensified and concentrated to an almost unbearable degree. He had for her as much love as his nature could feel for any one ; and this altogether apart from and in addition to the more selfish pleasure which he felt in her presence.

Thus to him the prospect of a life without her was more appalling than the thought of death.

What he feared about death was what many fear—the act of dying, not the after possibilities. The sole feeling he had in contemplating death was the yielding up of whatever there was to make life pleasant. The moment the balance showed more pain than pleasure in living, he was eager to die.

All the vague thoughts which crowded his mind through the long hours of the night were tinged by reflections of this leading thought. All night long he was balancing the scale—whether to live or die.

And there was but one hope, faint and shadowy and feeble, yet strong enough to save the scale of life from kicking the beam. Was there not yet a chance of winning Margery? Did she love him enough to overlook that miserable intrigue with Esther? Over and over and over again he turned the matter in his thoughts, viewing it from every point in which it seemed to offer any palliation of his wrong, any prospect of her forgiveness.

This was why he had forced the question upon her

that evening, seeking to probe and try and test the strength of her love ; to win a clear confession of it. A hundred times he recalled the memory of that kiss she had pressed on his forehead ; the ecstasy in which he had felt that even death at such a moment would be welcome.

Then by a wayward turn, his thoughts rushed off to Esther Southerst, and fastened on the time when he had sought to kill her.

How different had seemed to him the idea of death in connection with those two. The one he would have killed with infinite pleasure and without even a passing sense of remorse. At the touch of the other's lips he could have died with a blessed feeling of peace and rest. That contrast was in his thoughts when he sank into the few intervals of unrestful, dream-broken, troubled slumber. He dreamt then a dream which seemed more vivid than life.

It was that he and Margery were both dead ; wandering like happy children, hand in hand, in a strange but beautiful country, where everything seemed calm, peaceful, and abidingly happy. One by one a thousand incidents occurred, as if years of this blissful state had passed—as will happen in dreams when the brain is roused and feverish.

He woke at a point of some change in the dream—he had not slept more than a few minutes—but the dream had given a new turn to his thoughts. If only he and Margery could die together. He fought with this, wrestling to put it quite away from him and out of his thoughts altogether. He compelled himself to think of other matters ; of his father, of Dallas, of

Esther Southerst, even of Mrs. Rudyer and what Dallas had said of her.

But in between the gaps of thought, thrusting itself through the other thoughts and getting itself mixed up inextricably with them, foiling his efforts to forget it, and mocking his attempts to be oblivious of it, back it came in different guises, but always with the one leading strain :

"The only chance of happiness."

Thinking once of Dallas he recalled his promise. It had been given under a threat ; and no such promise was ever binding. He would do nothing against his own life, he had said, without giving Dallas time to get to see him. It was a madman's trick to give a promise like that. He had no right to ask for it. It was not binding. It was absurd, childish, silly, to expect any one to remember such a pledge. Then he turned as suddenly the other way, and remembered what his father had said about a pledged word. That was right. He would call back the word he had given.

At this, when he had made the resolve, he rose from the bed, lit a lamp, and began to think how he should word a letter. This gave him occupation. He was working toward an end. He didn't acknowledge what that end was, even to himself. But he was conscious of it with a dim, misty sense of something that promised happiness. His letter, when he had finished the draft of it, was short.

"Dear Mr. Dallas,—The circumstances under which we spoke on Saturday night have now been quite

changed, and of course all I said must be taken to have changed with them. I make no promises.—
Yours ever, "G. Drury."

He read this over several times, but made no alteration in it, and at length made a fair copy of it, addressed the envelope, and fastened it. As he did this he murmured the name:

"Margery! my Margery!"

Then some faint reflection of the feeling he had known when he had laid his head on Margery's bosom, and heard her say she loved him, and felt the touch of her lips on his face, rose within him, and he smiled. His face was haggard and lined and drawn with his agony, and his eyes were dark circled, and his lips were bluish and dry, and the expression of his face was that of intense and absorbing melancholy, yet the smile lighted it for a moment, and a gleam of happier promise shone in his eyes, making the face beautiful, despite its stress of emotion. It was the memory of his dream-happiness which thus illumined the gloom of his living misery. It was a dream of possibility, and before morning came his active brain had begun to think out and piece together the means for its accomplishment.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"Hullo, where's Crips? Here's a letter for him," said Guy the next morning, bursting into the room where his two sisters and Mrs. Rudyer were already at breakfast.

"He's not come down yet," said Nan.

"Lazy beggar," replied Guy, putting the letter down in Godfrey's place. "Good-morning, Mrs. Rudyer. Morning, girls. Bit pasty this morning, Madge. You don't look up to Dick at all."

"We don't look up to Guy, that's certain," said Nan.

"Funny girl you, Nan. Witty little thing. That beggar Momerie's bringing out all your points, eh? Don't blame you. You'll want something to keep your spirits up with a wooden spoon like that. Eh, Mrs. Rudyer?"

The widow had laughed at this, because it told against Nan.

"A wooden spoon's better than a brass crock."

"That's dreadfully feeble, considered as a retort. So disgustingly personal, and so rough on the rest of the brazen family—such a reflection on yourself." And the widow encouraged him with another laugh for this.

Nan, not having another retort ready, passed it over in silence.

But though Guy would laugh at Nan himself, he did not at all approve of Mrs. Rudyer doing it, so he turned to her next.

"Fine morning for a sail, Mrs. Rudyer. You like the sea. Disposed for a spin on the *Flirt*?" And he grinned in mischievous remembrance of her former experience.

"I am afraid I can't manage it to-day," she answered.

"It's as smooth as a mill pond, with a nice little soldier's breeze. Like it was when you went out once before. Remember?" And he laughed again.

"Did I go? I only remember once, and then it wasn't smooth, because I know the boy who was steering was unable to control the boat, and very stupidly wetted me through. It was that young hobble-de-hoy, Alan Ramsay's brother, I think, or some such boy, wasn't it?" And she smiled graciously at Guy.

Nan coughed provokingly.

"Don't pay to stroke you the wrong way; your claws are too sharp," answered Guy, coloring, and looking death at Nan for laughing.

"I think you'd better get your breakfast, Guy, hadn't you?" said Margery quietly. "Besides, it's past ten o'clock, and we've all finished."

"Yes, don't be too hard on the poor boy, Mrs. Rudyer," put in Nan. "You'll spoil his appetite. Remember he's young, and no match for your slings and arrows."

There was a good deal of meaning underneath this,

and Mrs. Rudyer would have retorted had not a servant entered.

"A telegram—for Miss Nan, miss," she said to Margery.

"For me?" said Nan in astonishment.

"By Jove, he must be in earnest to go and pop by telegraph. Poor fellow," cried Guy. "Read it out, Nan. Let's hear the newest form of short proposal at twelve words for sixpence, with a halfpenny for every extra word. Make a chap grudgy of his dearests and darlings that."

"What is it, dear?" asked Margery.

"It's—it's nothing," answered Nan, blushing a fiery red and then paling, as she folded the telegram hastily and put it away in her pocket.

"Is it from your stockbroker, Nan?" said Guy again, with a laugh. "Some of your superfluous thousands gone up or down or squash-bang. No, I pin my faith to a proposal. Just look at your face. You're as red as young Sal Mawdle's hair. And now I'll be hanged if you're not as white as Crips when his liver goes wrong."

"Guy!" said Margery.

"All right, Madge; beg your pardon. I ought to have said Godfrey, I know. I'm very sorry. When I was young I was often informed that I ought never to deride the ailments or the afflictions of the aged or the crip. . . . Good morning, Godfrey," he said hastily, checking himself and turning very red and confused as the cripple came into the room.

"Excuse me, if I open this," said Godfrey, taking up his letter, after he had greeted them all. He was

looking very white and very ill. He read the letter—it was that from Hugh Dallas enclosing Mrs. Rudyer's—and then picked up the enclosure which had fallen out of the envelope and on to the table where Mrs. Rudyer herself saw it.

"I say, Godfrey," began Guy, who could never be silent for long together. "What do you think of the latest? Here's Nan, if you please, beginning the day with a telegram."

The cripple was in that frame of mind in which anything unusual is regarded as suspicious.

"Who from?" he asked, looking sharply at the girl.

"That's the joke," said Guy. "That fellow Momerie has popped the question by wire."

"What do you mean?" asked, Godfrey brusquely.

"Sorry my throat isn't bigger so that you could jump down it more comfortably. 'Fraid you'll hurt yourself one of these days trying at it," said Guy dryly. Godfrey's bluff, imperious tone always nettled Guy.

"Well, it's coming to a pass if one has to carry about a dictionary of polite terms every time one speaks to a schoolboy," sneered Godfrey; and Mrs. Rudyer pointed the remark with a particularly irritating laugh.

"What a pleasant, cheery, genial, merry, chirpy little cricket you are, Godfrey; always so light-hearted and jolly. A regular Mark Tapley. Wonder where on earth you get that fund of good-humor from! It's marvelous in me that you never scowl, or mutter, or growl, or look bilious, or spiteful. Any one to see you now never ought to feel melancholy any more. You look quite as blithe and festive as a pauper's corpse. All right, Margery, you needn't look like that. That

playful little kitten can take his own part without your slicing in." Guy was getting angry.

"You shouldn't check Guy's gentlemanly instinct of repartee, Margery," said Godfrey. "That sort of genius ought not to be cramped by any foolish restrictions as to taste or tact."

"Tact," retorted Guy, with a short laugh of sarcasm. "Tact, eh? Yes, you're a model of tact."

"That's only a poor sort of sarcasm, my boy," said Godfrey patronizingly, "which consists in repeating a word with a kind of low, vulgar snort like yours. It possesses neither the keenness of the rapier, nor the crude force of the bludgeon. It is, in fact, suggestive of little more than poverty of wit."

"Oh, stow it," answered Guy.

"You didn't find out who the mysterious telegram was from, Mr. Godfrey," said the widow, prompted by curiosity.

"I've heard enough about that telegram from Guy, I think, without troubling his sister, Mrs. Rudyer. I might not get off so well from Nan; her claws are sharper than a school-boy's nails."

"But she generally keeps them as close as she has kept that telegram," returned the widow, with gracious spite.

"Have we finished breakfast?" asked Margery. "If so, I think we may as well go. We all seem rather as if we were practising unpleasant personalities. Nan, I want to speak to you."

Margery rose from the table, and the two girls left the room together.

"Is the telegram any bad news, dear?"

"I don't know. I—I can't say. I must wait."

She spoke with such hesitation and embarrassment that Margery looked meaningly into her face and smiled.

"Is it—"

"No, of course not," said Nan, reddening, and speaking a little indignantly. "I'll tell you about it presently, if I can. But it's not my secret."

"What a mystery! Well, it'll keep, I suppose? I'm going to see what's the matter with uncle. Are you coming?" asked Margery, running lightly up the broad staircase and looking over the balustrade at the younger girl. Then she stopped, and leaning down to Nan said, somewhat archly, "There was more than surprise in that blush of yours, when you opened that telegram. You won't deceive me, young sis. Whoever that was . . ." and she nodded her head and laughed very significantly, and ran on up the staircase.

"What nonsense, Madge," said Nan, blushing even more vividly than before, as she turned away to the library. She went through the larger room and into the sanctum, and having carefully closed the door, she took out the telegram and read it with close, thoughtful care.

"Am sending most important letter by train addressed to you at Seacove Station. Urgent and private. Say nothing till you have read letter.—DALLAS."

"What can it mean?" she asked herself. "And

why does he select me?" The color rose at this and her heart beat. "Why not choose his—Mrs. Rudyer?" Color faded here. "I've a good mind not to have anything to do with it. I don't want to have any letters. I—"

"Hallo, here you are, Nan! Come on out, there's a good sort. That fellow Crips fairly makes me sick. Let's have a row or a sail. It's a ripping day for a sail; and if you like it, the whiting on the black rock'll bite like winking."

Nan looked out of the window at the sky, as if in doubt, for an instant, but refused the next minute; and when her brother had gone away disconsolate, she said to herself, as if in excuse:

"I don't want his letters; but I'd better see what it all means," and then she went to put on her hat to go to the station and fetch the letter which was brought to her by a special messenger from Hugh Dallas.

The letter frightened as well as excited her.

"My Dear Miss Nan,—I am obliged to make what will sound to you a very strange request, since I cannot put on paper the reasons which I have. When I tell you that in my opinion they may be matters of life and death, you will feel sure that they are exceedingly grave and urgent. I hope to be at the Manor House to-morrow or the next day; and then I will tell you all that you should know. But in the meantime, please give your most careful attention to this.

"By the time you get this, within a short time of it, the engagement between your sister and Mr. Godfrey will be broken off. The circumstances which have led

to this are so painful and distressing that the most serious consequences are to be feared. Those consequences may threaten your sister with *most serious danger;* and I write to warn you not to leave her alone with Godfrey, scarcely to leave her side either day or night—especially the latter—until I have had an opportunity of talking to you.

"I write to you because, of all persons at the Manor House, I choose you as most likely to understand that I should not take such a course as this without serious reason; and, secondly, because you can do what will be needed in the matter of watchfulness better than any one else. I think you had better not tell your sister, unless you find that it is necessary for her safety.

"Your sincere friend,

"Hugh Dallas.

"*P. S.*—I open this to say I have changed my plan. I have determined to send this by special messenger with instructions to give it into your hands and your hands only. I can therefore speak a little more plainly than in the foregoing, which I have not time to rewrite. The reason of my fear is this. When he saw that the engagement was likely to be broken off, G. D. was so dejected that he thought of laying violent hands on his own life—and perhaps on that of another. When at the Manor House on Saturday I obtained from him a promise that he would make no attempt on his life until he had withdrawn the word he gave. That withdrawal may reach me at any moment, and I greatly fear what may happen. You will see now why I have lost no

time in telling you to watch and guard your sister until either Godfrey can be removed or other arrangements made.

"I should not put such a task upon you were I not certain that you are resourceful enough to perform it.

"Courage. Rely upon yourself. You are my ally,

"H. D."

As Nan read the letter, a feeling at first of vague disappointment disturbed her. She had expected something more closely affecting herself—in fact, she herself hardly understood the feelings which had been raised by the telegram.

But the sense of disappointment vanished rapidly and gave way to consternation and alarm as she read on; and at the conclusion of the first part the uncertainty of the wording frightened her much. The second part, though it put the truth nakedly and showed how real the danger might be, had a somewhat reassuring effect.

She thought she could detect Dallas's reason for wishing to inform her as fully as possible. He knew how distasteful suspense was to her; and she thanked him mentally for his thoughtfulness. It pleased her to picture him thinking thus for her.

The last words, the expression of confidence and the little word, "Courage," affected her most pleasurably. When she read it the second time—she was lingering slowly by the roadside to do this—she looked round to see that no one was in sight to observe her, and pressed it to her lips, kissing the spot where the word "Courage" was written.

Then she hurried on to the Manor House, determined to do all that was in her power to carry out the charge laid on her. It was not till then that she began to think of the cause of all—the breaking of the engagement. What on earth could be the cause? She took the letter out again to see if she could have missed any sentences saying what it was. She had not; and a very feminine feeling of pique at his silence on the point stirred her.

As the excitement of the news subsided, its extreme gravity pressed home upon her with increasing effect, and before she reached home her sense of reponsibility and her fears had very greatly developed.

She went at once to Margery's room, and found her sitting there pale and puzzled.

"Where have you been, Nan?" asked the elder sister eagerly. "I have been looking for you. What do you think has happened? My engagement with Godfrey is broken off."

"How?" asked Nan, showing no sign of surprise.

"Uncle told me just after breakfast. I felt so guilty, Nan. He seemed so afraid of wounding me, and was so gentle and kind—and all the time I was longing just to throw up my hands for very joy. It seemed such guilty pleasure."

"Have you seen Godfrey?" asked Nan, in a matter-of-fact way, which Margery could not understand.

"One would think you knew what had happened, seeing how calmly you take it," said Margery.

"I am not calm, really, sis-sis," said Nan, kissing her sister. "I am frightened, I think. Have you seen Godfrey?"

"Only for a minute; just after I left uncle. He was waiting about, I think to see me."

"Well?" when Margery stopped. "What did he say?"

"He is not himself to-day. It was sure to disturb him. I was not expecting to see him, and—and I'm afraid I didn't look as wretched as he thought I ought to."

"Ah!" exclaimed Nan, in a tone which made Margery look at her.

"You know how brusque he is sometimes. He came up to me and seized my wrist. 'Are you glad, Margery?' he asked. I told him what was true, that I scarcely seemed to realize what had happened. Then he held my wrist for a long time without a word, and looked all the time right into my eyes, with such a look of wild sorrow on his face that my heart bled to see it. Poor Godfrey!"

"Was that all?" asked Nan again.

"No. After a long time, he asked me if I remembered what had passed last night, and whether I remembered a promise I had made to kiss him if he were dying, and before I could answer, he began to talk about Alan, and whether, now that I was free, I should ever think of marrying him. I could not help it, Nan," Margery broke off; "but I had not thought of Alan all the time, and the sudden mention of him made me blush until I was red to the roots of my hair. And all the time he held my wrist and stared into my face, his own growing blacker and blacker with gathering anger. Then he gave me a last look, which almost frightened me, and threw my hand away from him

violently, and cried in a passionate voice, 'My God, Margery, I believe you are glad,' and turned away and went hurriedly to his room."

"You frighten me, Madge," said Nan.

This was true enough. What she heard seemed to warrant all the fears which lay beneath Hugh Dallas's letter, and she resolved to keep a close watch.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The effect of awakening Nan's suspicions was to arouse her immediately to an almost extravagant condition of excited vigilance.

Naturally shrewd and observant, all her faculties of observation were at once forced up to the highest degree, with the result that she was constantly trying to draw conclusions from the simplest acts which she noted.

During the whole day she watched Godfrey with the concentrated vigilance of a company of female detectives. She tried to see every look of his eyes, every expression of his face, and every movement that he made. She sought to picture to herself how a character like his would be likely to put into act the thoughts which she believed him to be harboring. If he sat silent, he seemed to her to be meditating some point of his scheme. If he gesticulated, or talked much, or laughed, she read the act as a wish to hide his real feelings. Whatever he did, she found some explanation connecting the action or inaction with her suspicions; and it never occurred to her that she was absurdly exaggerating either her suspicions or the significance of his movements.

This was not unnatural. She was utterly unacquainted with human wickedness. Her own nature

was frank and free, kind and loving; and the farthest thought from her mind was that of cruelty to any living thing.

Thus the idea that Godfrey should meditate any crime, and that it should be associated with the idea of cruelty, was inexpressibly repugnant to her. Moreover, that repugnance was increased a thousandfold by the fact that the object of the purposed cruelty should be Margery—and her suspicions had taken the form of certainty on this point. Her love for Margery was as strong in her as any religious faith could be; and this love armed her at a hundred points in her sister's defense. Lastly, the fact that the charge had been laid upon her by Hugh Dallas had more effect than she would have cared to acknowledge.

All these causes combined to rouse her to a pitch of alarmed vigilance.

What had passed between Margery and herself had given her matter for much troubled thought, and her fears went sailing along, swept on by the breeze of impulsive imagination, until she began to ask herself what Godfrey would do, and when he would do it.

At first the mere act of thinking of this filled her with indescribable alarm. But she forced herself to try and think consecutively, and gradually her ideas took a more and more definite shape.

It was clear that Dallas considered the danger was immediate. He would not otherwise have warned her, since he himself was coming over on the following day. Moreover, he appeared to expect that the chief danger would be at night. He said as much in his letter,

when he warned her not to leave Margery's side either day or night—especially the latter. And as she thought over the matter, she came to the conclusion that this was certainly the more probable time Godfrey would choose.

To Nan it seemed much more natural to associate any such deed as might be looked for in the present case with the night than the daytime; and yet the very reasonableness of this notion added to her fears.

She resolved not to relax her vigilance during the day on that account, however, and thus she followed her sister like a shadow, until Margery herself began to notice what was being done.

"Do you want anything?" she asked, when Nan had followed her out of the room for the twentieth time.

"Yes, Marge, I want to be with you to-day," answered the younger girl.

"Why? Are you afraid that I shall do anything rash after what has happened?" she asked, with a laugh. "Or are you afraid that Godfrey will eat me?"

"The breaking off of the engagement has given you back to me, sis-sis," answered Nan, with sweet equivocation, as she wound an arm round her waist. "I like to feel you close to me."

"Well, you are keeping close enough to me," and Margery laughed again.

"Oh, that Nan's a regular spooney Dick," cried Guy, who had come up behind them, and had overheard what they said. "She's always wanting to hang over some one or other. But to-day it's no

wonder. Any one might be excused for going a bit mad at getting shut of old Crips for a brother. I call it fairly spiffing. But I say, isn't he just mad?"

"What do you mean, Guy?" asked Nan quickly, starting at the word he used.

"Why, that he's most awfully raggy at losing Marge. But how beastly close you have kept all this," he said, turning to the elder sister. "There's only one thing more jolly mysterious than this breaking things off, and that's how they ever got started at all. You never cared for Crips, did you, Marge; or if you did, why the dickens have you broken up the business? You girls are awfully queer cattle."

"You boys don't understand these things, Guy," said Nan, with an air of superiority.

"You shut up, Nan, about boys," retorted Guy with a guffaw. "You girls don't seem to do much good whether you understand them or not. You yourself have been playing fast and loose, first with old Don, and then with that cocky Momerie; and now, here's Margery setting the whole blessed place in a regular muddle, first because she thinks she will marry Crips, and next because she says she won't. I call it rot."

"Don't mind him, dear," said Nan to Margery. "He means well, but he's crude in his speech. In reality he's quite as glad as we are at what has happened."

When Nan made what Guy called her cutting speeches, she was always particularly clear in her pronunciation, and distinct in tone. She was now—and with specially unfortunate effect, as Godfrey chanced

to come well within earshot, and overheard the last remark from the landing above where the three were standing.

He came quickly down the staircase, looking very angry, indeed, and very gloomy. Nan blushed crimson when she saw him, and, to make matters worse for her, Guy laughed hugely at her discomfiture.

"I'm glad that something I've been able to do has at last pleased you all so much," said Godfrey, as he passed by, scowling at Nan. "It's so seldom that you all three do agree, that your present unanimity is quite unique. But it was scarcely necessary for you to get together in the hall, and shout your joy all over the house."

"You are unjust, Godfrey," answered Margery. "You have heard only a part of what was said, and have misunderstood it."

"It's not very easy to misunderstand that horse-laugh in which your brother is accustomed to air his pleasant wit," sneered Godfrey. He had stopped as he spoke and turned toward the others; and his eyes rested very angrily on the lad.

"It's better to have a horse-laugh than a snake-bite," retorted Guy, without much point, but with a good deal of anger. "If you weren't such a scrimp of a chap—"

"Guy," exclaimed Margery, interrupting him, and speaking in a tone which Guy knew too well to resist. "Come, Godfrey," she added, turning away to him, to walk with him through the rooms to the garden.

Nan for the moment was puzzled what to do. She had seen his anger, and the look he had directed at

Guy showed her an expression on his face which frightened her. She had seen him angry before, but the suspicions had been roused in her now gave especial force to her fears, and recalling Dallas's injunction not to leave the two alone, she went after them and linked her arm in Margery's.

Godfrey seemed to her to resent her action, and bent a long, scrutinizing look upon her.

"You seem in a great hurry to prevent Margery being alone with me, Nan," he said angrily. "Do you want to make me feel the difference now that the engagement is at an end? You are a very zealous sister."

There was a nasty sneer in the words.

"Nothing could be farther from my thoughts, Godfrey," answered Nan. "Madge and I were together, that's all."

"You mean I am an interloper, do you? Thank you."

"No, no ; I mean nothing of the kind," answered Nan, "of course I do not. There is enough trouble in all this, without our setting to work to quarrel with each other."

"Enough trouble," repeated the cripple, snapping out the words. "So far as I can see none of you find much trouble in it. You all seem glad."

"You will read it all differently some day," answered Nan soothingly, "when there has been time to let the first shock pass over."

"You find the pleasure so great as to be a shock, then," he said, very bitterly. "You are worse than Guy, with his hobble-de-hoy laughter."

"Do not let us speak of this subject at all. It pains me," said Margery.

"It did not seem to pain you very much, when I spoke of it and Alan Ramsay just now," replied Godfrey, almost brutally, and with a very forbidding and angry look.

At this Margery blushed, and the sight of her confusion increased the cripple's anger. He seized her arm, looked into her face and seemed as if about to say something; but then, with a sudden gesture of swift passion, he threw her arm from him, and left the two sisters, with hurried and excited steps.

Margery gazed after him pityingly; but Nan was angry at his treatment.

"He is brutal," she said impulsively.

"He is beside himself with trouble, Nan," answered Margery gently. "He is not like other people."

"No, that's very true," said Nan dryly. "But what angered him was your blush when he mentioned Alan's name. You did blush, sis-sis," she said, with sweet significance. And then added, inconsequently as it seemed, "I'm very glad," and she kissed her.

Margery understood her.

The incident with Godfrey, however, had the effect of increasing Nan's uneasiness; and her vigilance did not slacken the whole day.

In the evening, Godfrey came down into the drawing-room and sat silent and moody, with his eyes fixed constantly on Margery. The captain was very nervous and silent also—very ill at ease; but especially tender and gentle to Margery. He kept her close to his side the whole time he was in the room; and

when she played and sang to him, he went and sat close to the piano. It seemed as if he could not do too much to make plain his love and care.

Nan sat as far from observation as possible, with some work on her lap with which she appeared to busy herself. But in reality her eyes rarely strayed from Godfrey or Margery ; and all the time she was racking her thoughts to try and hit upon the probable course which Godfrey would adopt, if he really meant to do anything. When they all went to bed, it seemed to Nan's now unduly active imagination that Godfrey's excitement, masked and suppressed as it was beneath an outward appearance of gloomy dejection, increased considerably. His eyes followed Margery, in every movement seeming to rest upon her with troubled, speculative agitation.

She was struck, moreover, by what happened when Godfrey and the captain parted for the night. Nan overheard what passed.

"Good night, father," said Godfrey, laying a white hand in his. "The saddest day of my life this."

"Good night, lad. How cold your hand is, and trembling. Do you feel ill, boy ?"

"All will be well to-morrow," was the reply, spoken with a tone of such intense melancholy that Nan was struck by it.

"You will do your duty—like my son ?" asked the captain, holding the cripple's hand, and looking thoughtfully and questioningly and kindly into his face.

Godfrey knew that he referred to the marriage with Esther Southerst.

"You shall never have to complain of me after to-morrow, father," and as he spoke he stooped and kissed the captain's hand.

As the captain went away, Nan saw the sadness that gathered on his face and darkened it. But the expression on Godfrey's as he looked after the old man, went straight to the girl's heart and chilled her. By a flash of intuition she seemed to read in his face the thought that lay beneath his words. He meant to die that night.

As this thought occurred to her, she felt herself grow pale and shiver as she linked her arm in Margery's and looked at Godfrey. The latter sighed heavily as he turned to the girls and bade them good night.

They went up the broad staircase together, and he stood watching them from the hall beneath till they reached the corridor along which their rooms were, side by side.

"I am fanciful to-night, Marge," said Nan, as they reached Margery's room. "I feel nervous and cold, and I don't know what. I wish you'd come and sleep with me."

"I mustn't encourage notions of that sort, little sister," said Margery, with a smile, as she kissed her. Despite her pity for Godfrey, whose sorrow was plain enough to her, she could not but feel a strange sense of relief that the engagement was broken, and, in her quiet way, much happiness. "You must fight your nervousness down."

"But I'm low-spirited, too," pleaded Nan. "And to-night I should like to have you with me."

"But I don't like your bed, Nan. It's so hard and so small. Come and sleep with me."

Nan's object was to get her away from her room for that night, and thus she continued to urge her. But Margery did not yield, and at length Nan gave way, and went to her room to make arrangements.

As she passed from one room to the other she saw some one standing at the end of the great corridor by the staircase. She went quickly to the spot and found Godfrey.

"What do you want, Godfrey?" she asked, with quick suspicion in her tone, then adding, in a different voice, "Can I get you anything?"

"No, no," he answered, with some hesitation. "I —I have left my book down-stairs, and am going to fetch it. I cannot sleep to-night. I—I want something to read. But you—why are you not in your room?" and Nan thought she could detect suspicion in the question.

"I was saying good night to Margery," she replied, purposely misleading him. "Good night."

She went back to her room more disturbed than ever, and made haste to join Margery. When she went into the bedroom, she closed the door, and then found there was no key in the lock.

"Have you no key to your door, Marge?" she asked.

The other laughed.

"Key, Nan? Yes, dear, of course. But I never use it. Are you afraid of burglars? Come along into bed."

Nan forced up a laugh in reply. But she was frightened. It might be no more than a coincidence; but on the other hand it might be that some one had taken the key away.

"I sha'n't be a minute, sis-sis," said Nan; and then, feigning an excuse for a minute's delay, she placed a chair in such a position that the door on opening must move it, and on it she put a small glass vase, which would fall to the ground at the least movement of the chair. She did all this without letting Margery see her, and then got into bed.

The two sisters chatted for a few minutes till Nan, pretending to be very tired, feigned sleep. She was anxious that all should be still in the room that she might lie and listen for any sound in the house.

It was a dreary vigil; and the strain on the girl's nerves made it the more irksome. Fancy cheated her fifty times into a belief that some one was moving in the corridor outside the room; and many times she lifted her head to listen.

Once or twice, when Margery was sleeping soundly and peacefully, she stole gently out of bed and crept to the door to make sure that everything was as she had left it.

The time passed on leaden wings.

The hall clock chimed every quarter, and it seemed almost impossible to Nan that the hours could be so long. She counted each stroke with painstaking eagerness, and longed for the daylight to come, as she had never, even in nights of pain and childish sickness, longed for it before in her life.

At length, and as it seemed quite suddenly, a heavy sleepiness came on her, and she had to fight against an overwhelming desire to sleep. At this she got out of bed, and leant her head against the brasswork of the bedstead, and even against the wall, that the cold

touch on her hot face and forehead might keep her awake.

Then in a moment, more suddenly than it had come, all trace of her sleepiness had left her. She heard distinctly a movement of the door handle. She gathered closely round her the dressing-gown she had thrown over her shoulders, and went and stood close to the door.

Being on the alert, she felt there was no need for the "trap" she had laid, and softly and silently she took away the glass vase and waited. Her heart beat with feverish speed; and her eyes, now grown accustomed to the darkness, were fixed on the door.

Gently, and by almost imperceptible degrees, the handle was turned from without, and each slight grating sound sent a thrill through her.

Then the door was pushed slowly open inch by inch, each movement being followed by a pause on the part of the intruder. As it touched the chair and moved it, the efforts ceased for a moment, and all was as still as the grave.

Nan could almost hear her heart beat.

At that moment, Margery moved in the bed with the sigh of a heavy sleeper, to which the sound of her regular breathing succeeded.

At this, the efforts recommenced from without, and with the same infinitely scrupulous care, a hand was thrust into the room, and the chair was pushed aside.

Nan, even in the comparative darkness, could recognize the long, white, thin fingers as those of the cripple; and she knew that the moment for action had come, and that the worst forebodings had been fulfilled.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Nan hesitated what course to take. Hitherto she had thought only of the need to frustrate whatever plan Godfrey might have formed to do Margery an injury; but now that the moment for action had come, she was conscious of something more that must be done. She must try to act so that no one in the house but herself and Godfrey should know of the attempt. In the rush of ideas and plans that came upon her, curiously, her thoughts rushed to Dallas. What would he wish her to do? And as if in answer to that thought, an idea suggested itself. When the chair had been moved, Godfrey waited before opening the door further to enter the room, as if to assure himself that he was not overheard. It was in that moment that Nan formed her plan. It was simple enough. Just to wait until he entered the room, and then speak as if nothing at all had happened. A full minute passed before the door was pushed open wide enough to let Godfrey enter. As he did so, Nan said in a whisper:

"What is it, Godfrey, dear? Are you ill?" And she went and stood in front of him.

The sudden appearance of Nan, fully dressed as it seemed to him, startled him so that he could do nothing for a moment but stare at the girl in motionless wonder. Then he pressed both his hands to his face

and staggered back into the corridor. Nan followed him.

"What is the matter, Godfrey? Are you ill, dear?" she repeated, closing the door behind her, that Margery might not be disturbed. "Don't wake Margery. She's not very well."

There was a lamp always burning in the hall, and the light of it came up through the broad well staircase. Godfrey went toward the staircase slowly, and Nan followed, keeping always between him and the room door. When they reached the balustrade, he took hold of it as if to steady himself, and turned to look at Nan, who was now quite calm and cool.

"What were you doing in that room?" he asked, pain and anxiety making his voice husky and dry.

"I was watching Margery, Godfrey," answered Nan steadily, as she looked fixedly at him.

"Ah!" It was half gasp, half cry, and he started back almost as if she had struck him. Then he asked from between lips that shivered with cold or fear, "What do you mean?"

"That I was afraid for Margery," said Nan again, resolutely.

He seized her wrist suddenly and turned on her fiercely.

"Do you mean—?" he began, in an angry whisper.

Nan did not quail, but returned his look with one quite as firm as his, while she quietly unclasped his fingers from her wrist.

"You are not well, Godfrey, dear. Not yourself. Go back to your room and think no more of this. Think what would happen if all the house were roused

now. Good night, dear," and she bent and kissed him.

Her quiet self-possession conquered him.

"You have saved me, Nan," he exclaimed passionately, and seizing her hand he pressed it to his lips, and rushed away.

Then Nan walked quietly back to Margery's room, and had just time to tear off her dressing-gown and wake Margery, saying she was not well, before the reaction came, and she fainted.

Before Nan had recovered sufficiently to enable Margery to go to sleep again, the dawn had broken, and the girl felt that there was no longer any cause for alarm. Her fear once passed, gave place to an intense longing for Hugh Dallas to come, that she might have some one to tell of all that had happened, and to consult as to what should be done. He arrived before noon, and when he heard the news, looked very grave.

"You managed splendidly and bravely, Miss Nan," he said, with the thoughtful smile the girl knew so well; and she colored with pleasure at the praise. "It was a crisis which might have tried the strongest nerves and beaten the longest head."

"What is to be done?" she asked.

"I will see Mr. Godfrey," he answered. "He must go away."

"Shall you tell him what I have told you?" The thought frightened her.

"I must, I think. But you need have no more fears. We are allies, you know; firm allies now, again; and I shall not leave my stanch ally in the

lurch. I shall stay here, if I may, until the crisis is passed. You would like me to stay, Miss Nan?"

The girl's head was downcast, and she did not answer in words; but the rapid glance she gave was more eloquent than words, and made him think of what Esther Southerst had said.

Impulsively he held out his hand to take hers. Just then the sound of approaching footsteps interrupted him and stayed the words which were almost framing themselves on his lips. They were together in the sanctum, and some one was coming through the larger library.

It was Godfrey, and as he entered, he looked searchingly and suspiciously at both of them.

"I heard you were here, Mr. Dallas," he said, as they shook hands.

"Yes. I have come purposely to see you," replied Dallas.

Nan left the room hurriedly, and Dallas, who held the door for her to pass, smiled encouragingly to her and whispered, "Courage."

Then he turned to Godfrey.

"You have broken faith with me, Mr. Godfrey," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked the cripple, with quick alarm in his face.

"You remember the conversation we last had, and the promise you gave. And you know what has since happened."

"The promise I gave I recalled in my letter. If you had wanted to see me, you could have come yesterday. But you are here now. What is it you want to say?"

Hugh Dallas held out his hand without speaking; but Godfrey drew back, affecting not to see the gesture.

"I want you to put your hand in mine, as a sign of friendship," said Dallas kindly.

"I am in no mood for heroics," answered the cripple.

"Nor am I. I was never in more deadly earnest in my life; never more anxious to keep to the plain common-sense of a very ugly situation. Miss Nan has told me what happened last night. It was I who, in fear of the letter which has since reached me, warned her to be on the watch. It is because I knew of the danger that I am here now."

"I don't know what cock-and-bull story Nan may have made up. Nor do I care," answered Godfrey, with a sneer. "But there is little use in listening to a girl's hysterical nonsense. At least, I am in no mood to take any notice of it, whatever you may be," and he laughed unpleasantly, and yet uneasily.

"Do you mean to deny what happened last night, then?"

"How can I deny what I have not had described to me?"

"You know perfectly well what Miss Nan had to say and has said," replied Dallas firmly. "She has told the truth."

"Of course," sneered Godfrey. "She'd be sure to. Every one does, who speaks against me in this house."

"You do not seem to understand how painful to me such an interview as this must be. I had hoped for a

very different reception. But at all events what I have to say can be briefly said. You promised me that you would make no attempt on your own or any other's life until you had given me time to see you. That pledge you have broken. Last night you planned an attempt on Miss Allingham's life; and the attempt was only thwarted by her sister's vigilance, after a warning from me. I don't mention this for any other purpose but one," he continued, taking no notice of an attempted protest and interruption by Godfrey. "That is—to determine what is to be done in the future."

The cripple had turned to the window and made no reply, but stared out.

Hugh Dallas went and stood by him.

"Godfrey," he said kindly, "I am a friend. Treat me as one and remember our last conversation."

Godfrey shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and half glanced round, with somewhat of a sneer on his face.

"You have no reason to sneer at *me*," said Dallas. "Think what would have been the position of matters here this morning if I had not taken precautions?"

"To the devil with all this melodramatic nonsense," cried the cripple, with sudden passion. "You come here with your insinuations that I am a murderer, or some such nonsense, and then go on maundering and fooling about a lot of supposed consequences among a lot of drivel about friendship. You and I read friendship in a different light, Mr. Dallas."

"Remember your attempts on Esther Southerst," said Dallas sternly, "and be thankful you have been

foiled in this last and worst attempt on Miss Allingham."

"Pshaw, nonsense, man! You let your imagination run away with your wits. My patience is out. If you've nothing more to say but rubbish of this kind, founded on the lies of a wanton, I will not stay here to listen to it. You all seem to think that, because I was fooled by a woman, you can all insult me just as you please. I'll have no more of it," and he turned to leave the room.

"Very, well, then, I have only one course left," said Dallas. "At any cost, I must tell Captain Drury all I know."

At this, Godfrey, who had half opened the door to go out, closed it again, and came back.

"What is the alternative to that?" he asked, very pale, and manifestly very ill at ease, but yet trying to hide his feelings under a sneer.

"There is but one alternative," answered Dallas firmly. "You must leave here for a time, and at once, and remain away until the feelings which you now have for Miss Allingham have passed over."

"You forget," sneered Godfrey, "you forget that my my father intends me to marry the woman Southerst?"

"No, I forget nothing. But I bear in mind what is necessary for Miss Allingham's safety. Think, man, think, what it is you have planned to do," he cried earnestly. "In the desire to satisfy your own evil wishes, you are willing to stab every happiness of every soul who loves you here."

The appeal made not the slightest impression on Godfrey, though it seemed that some form of mental

struggle was going on within him. He remained silent for some time, and then, looking up, fixed his eyes on Dallas's face, and asked in a tone that sounded low, cold, and sad :

"If I agree now, will you consent never to tell my father ; never, under any circumstances, and whatever may happen ? Will you swear it ?"

"My word is enough. You have it," answered Dallas.

"I agree, then," he replied. "I am going to my room ; you will find me there—when you want your prisoner. No, I won't shake hands. One thing you must do, go and explain to my father why I am leaving."

He left the room and Dallas followed, and from the larger room watched him mount the staircase in the direction of his own room. Then Dallas rang the bell, and asked the servant to tell the captain he wanted to see him particularly. Captain Drury came at once, and Dallas was pained to see how the sorrow was cutting him.

The captain was very glad to see Dallas, and greeted him with a warm and cordial hand-clasp, which the younger man returned with a sympathetic pressure.

"You have no bad news to tell me, I hope," said Captain Drury. "I am afraid all this trouble has shaken me ; for I find myself constantly dreading to hear of more trouble."

"No ; I think not. I only want to speak to you about your son, captain. I have a plan that I should like to talk over with you."

"A plan ? You know all that has happened, and

that he has consented to do justice to Esther Southerst?"

"Yes; I know that. I am not going to propose any interference with that—any permanent interference. But I am going to propose some slight alteration. I hope you will say it is an improvement."

"What is it?" asked the captain dubiously. "I have made up my mind that he must go through with what I told him. He must marry her."

"I want you to think carefully about his present frame of mind. Do you think there can be any chance of either of them finding any happiness in such a marriage?"

"Do not seek to turn me from that decision, Mr. Dallas," said the captain, promptly and decisively. "It is useless."

"I do not seek to do that, captain. Let me explain. Your son's state of mind is such just now that I fear grave danger might result from an attempt to push forward too rapidly any plan of that kind. I am not speaking without having carefully thought of this, and without serious reason for what I say. You have told me his history, and the reason of the fits of morbidness which pain us all. I think then that there should be some interval in which he should be weaned away from brooding upon all that has happened. No, do not decide until you have heard me," he said as the captain shook his head. "I myself am going to take my holidays almost immediately. Let him come to me to Middlingham until I can get away, and then we will have a ramble together over the Continent; and I will try to get his thoughts away, and to interest him

in literary work. From talks I have had with him, I do not despair that something might be done and some good come of it. I know he has had an inclination towards work of the kind. And work with occupation is the finest mental treatment for a disease such as his."

The captain made no reply, but began a sort of quarter-deck march up and down the room.

"If once he could be led to take an interest in some creative work of the kind, the battle would be half won," continued Dallas. "All these moody thoughts would be turned in a safe direction; and the sorrow would prove only an experience, which would strengthen instead of weakening his mind. This gloomy analysis would cease to be so distressing a self-concern, and life would have once more a promise. It has hitherto been all self with him; and his powerful imagination has been a curse instead of a blessing, because it has enlarged the torture-chamber of his morbid self-thoughts."

"But what of this—woman? What delay do you propose? I don't like delay where justice has to be done."

"She has been content to wait a long time, and, at any rate, a few weeks or months would not hurt her. If anything can be done, that would be long enough. There is no danger in delay in such a matter. On the contrary, there is much hope. At all events, we can but try."

And in this way Hugh Dallas, little by little, adducing reason after reason, gradually won the captain to see the prudence of his plan, till the latter consented to it.

"God grant you may be successful, Mr. Dallas," he said, very fervently, at the close of the interview. "I need not say what I think of your kindness and friendship in thus trying to come to the lad's rescue from himself. I hope I may repay it some day in some way."

"Perhaps sooner than you think," answered Dallas, smiling. "It may be that after all you will find I am only moved by a selfish motive—a desire to make myself quite secure of your good-will for a project that I shall want your consent to."

"What is that?" asked the captain, looking up in great surprise. "But whatever it is, you were sure of it before this," he added warmly.

"To-day I am not speaking of myself, but of Godfrey," replied Dallas. "But when the time comes —if it comes—I may remind you of that last promise."

"I will keep my word, be sure of that," cried the captain, wringing the other's hand. "When will Godfrey go?"

"To-day, when I go. He is waiting for me in his room. I will go to him now."

He ran up-stairs to Godfrey's room, but found it empty. Glancing round it, he saw a note on the table addressed to him.

He tore it open quickly, feeling vaguely alarmed and uneasy at Godfrey's absence.

"I cannot stay in the house. I cannot breathe in it. I am going out. That I may keep my word to you in the spirit if not the letter, I am going for a sail. On my return, I shall be found here."

Involuntarily Dallas looked round the room to see

if there were any signs by which he could judge of the other's motive in going out. Everything seemed in order. He looked out of the window, and then saw that clouds were moving quickly across the sky, while the trees were swaying beneath violent gusts and squalls of wind.

He went down-stairs looking very serious. In the hall Mrs. Rudyer and the two girls were standing.

"Good morning, Hugh," said the widow. "How solemn you look. You might be a burglar caught in the very act."

Hugh Dallas felt too serious to take any notice of this; though her flippancy had never seemed more like impertinence. He shook hands with Margery and the widow, and then turned at once to Nan.

"Will you give me a word, Miss Nan?" he said.

"What has happened?" she asked, seeing by his manner that something really grave was disturbing him.

"Have you seen Godfrey anywhere?"

"No," replied the girl.

"He was to wait for me in his room. I have arranged that he shall go away from here with me at once. He will go to Middlingham, and then with me to the Continent for a week or two, till the worst of the matter here has passed over."

"I understand," answered Nan, with sympathetic quickness. "You are very good."

"But he was not in his room, and has left a note saying he could not stay in the house, but would go out in the *Flirt*. I am uneasy about it, and I don't like it. Can he manage the boat?"

"Yes. But here comes Guy, he will tell us."

"Hallo, Mr. Dallas, how are you? I say, isn't that fellow Crips a queer chap? He hasn't been for a sail for I don't know how long; and here he goes and picks out a beastly squally day like this, with the wind blowing a capful outside the bay. He is a mad jackass. It isn't safe to sail a yard except under double reefs, and I'm hanged if he hasn't gone scooting off all alone in the boat with a whole mainsail and foresail, and he tried all he knew to get old Mat to clap on the biggest jib in the hold; only he wasn't such a maniac as to do anything of the kind. I call it a regular sin to go and risk a jolly little craft like the *Flirt* in such an infernally reckless manner—to say nothing of the beggar's own life."

His two hearers exchanged looks.

"Let us go down to the shore," said Dallas to Guy; and on the walk he questioned the lad more closely.

"Was he alone?"

"Rather. Crips can't bear to have any one in the boat. Thinks it shows he don't know how to handle her. But he does. He can do more with her than I can. I wouldn't go out in her alone to-day without a couple of reefs in the mainsail, I'm hanged if I would, for a fiver. But he went without turning a hair. He was as cool as a 'cumber, though old Mat mutinied and swore it was suicide; and wouldn't set the sails without the reefs. But as soon as Mat was in the dingy, and Crips had got off a bit, he brought her head to the wind and shook out the reefs himself. My, but old Mat *was* mad; and crikey, you should have heard him swear."

On the shore there were two or three sailors standing together, watching a white dot far out at sea. It was the mainsail of the *Flirt*.

"She won't come back, sir," said old Mat, shaking his head, and turning the quid in his mouth as he spoke. "She's a stiff enough craft, and Master Godfrey's known how to handle her ever sin' he were no higher than this post. She may be right enough while she's runnin', for he's a rare hand at the tiller; but if he tries to bring her to with all that canvas on her, and one o' them squalls catches her, why, bless ye, she'll jist roll over like a porprus; jest like a porprus. And I know the boat, don't I, mates, if any one do?"

"Aye, aye, Mat."

"I tell ye, I'd rather a giv anythin', than a set them sails. I might jest as well a sewn up Master Godfrey's shroud at once. And if I'd known what fool's game he was after, I'd a taken a ax and cut the blessed mast down to the deck. She'll never stand them gusts. It stands to reason she can't with all that spread o' canvas. She'll never come back. That's my view. Poor Master Godfrey, he must a been mad to try a game like that on."

And he was right.

The *Flirt* was recovered bottom upwards by those whom Dallas sent out at once to try and get to Godfrey's rescue; and the cripple himself was found entangled in some of the boat's cordage.

CHAPTER XXXV.

One afternoon, some weeks after Godfrey Drury's death, Hugh Dallas sat in his office reading a letter and awaiting a visitor. His face wore a look of quite unusual sternness and anger.

The letter was from Captain Drury, and ran as follows :

"My Dear Young Friend,—We have altered our plans again—at least, my two girls have insisted upon changing them, and are acting just like the arch-conspirators they are. They pretend they cannot stand the climate of dear old England in October, and insist on my taking them to the south of France. Of course it is they who are taking me; and all their pretense about the climate is just a fear that I may be unable to bear the Manor House so soon after my poor, dear lad's death. They are both bad diplomatists; for they were never in more vigorous health in their lives. But I don't tell them I can see through their plot: for I have an idea they like to serve this love-trick on their old uncle. At any rate, we shall not come home yet, though I am longing to set my eyes on the lad's last resting-place. Poor Godfrey! Poor boy! It was a sad end, that just when his resolves had turned to do justice, accident should have stepped in to thwart him."

"Ah, if it was accident, captain," interpolated Dallas, lowering the letter a moment. "If—but he knew too well what he was doing for that to be accident. Still, the captain doesn't know : no one knows but Nan and I,"—he called her "Nan" now in his thoughts—"and he never shall know the truth. Odd, that almost the only unselfish act of the poor fellow's whole life should be the manner in which he chose to quit it."

"But so it is," resuming the reading of the letter. "God works just in those inscrutable ways, and called him before repentance even had had time to pall. But the purpose of this letter is in reference to the unfortunate Esther Southerst. I think you are right. I had better not see her, though I should have done so, had I returned at once to Seacove. Will you see her, then, and make any arrangement you think right? I will do whatever you decide. I should like to leave this matter entirely in your hands, with only one condition—be generous. Remember she is a woman, and can never now have justice done to her, as it should have been, had the lad lived. Remember this, and be generous. As for ourselves, we are going to dawdle away a few months along the Riviera, and shall probably loiter until we can go to Rome for Easter. You cannot think what my two darlings are to me. Sweetness and Light, I call them. Madge all gentleness and care and solicitude ; Nan all brightness and radiance ;—and both all love. We often speak of you ; and Madge often expresses a wish that you could be with us. I wish the same. But I suppose it cannot be. By the way, you know of course

that Alan is coming out to join us, having promised his brother a run on the Continent with our Guy. We are all glad of this, and Nan seems especially pleased at the thought of seeing Alan. Both my pets send messages to you.

"Your sincere old friend,

"JOHN DRURY.

"*P.S.*—Remember, be generous."

"Kind heart," murmured Dallas, as he finished. "'Sweetness and light,' eh? Well, not a bad term for them. So Margery would like to have me out there, and Nan is especially glad that Alan is going out. What an innocent old soul it is!"

He laughed, and all the sternness left his face, giving place to a smile of peculiar significance and pleasure, as his thoughts traveled away to Nan. But the dark look came back again when an office lad came to announce that someone—a lady—wished to see him.

It was Esther Southerst, to whom he had written as soon as he had had the letter from the captain.

She came in demurely and quietly, dressed all in black, with crape on her jacket and dress, and wearing a widow's bonnet. She glanced round the room as if she had expected that a third person would be present. Finding Dallas alone, she seemed uncertain what part to attempt to assume. He gave her no hint of how he would receive her, but let her sit down before he said a word. They had not met since Godfrey's death.

"It is all very sad, Mr. Dallas," she said at length,

looking at him somewhat searchingly. And then when he made no answer she added, "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. I have been asked by Captain Drury to see you and to make such arrangement with you as will be right and fair. I will read you what he says, so that you may see his wishes for you and my right to speak in his name."

He read the passage in the letter, and her face brightened considerably at the word "generous."

"He is truly a good man," she said, giving a sigh of relief or satisfaction.

"There is one thing which it is necessary you should bear in mind. He does not know you—I do." He said this very dryly, and the woman blushed. "This letter is written in the belief that you are what he thought you were when he saw you here. I had intended to enlighten him, and for this purpose had arranged for the man whom you hunted to death to come to me for a time. But death interfered with the plan, and I never opened my lips."

"Hunted to death!" echoed the woman. "How do you mean? That Godfrey made away with himself?"

"I mean that, whatever was your motive, your work has been more complete than you expected, however great your enmity may have been to the dead," said Dallas sternly. "I mean, also, that when the captain tells me to deal generously with you, I mean it to be 'generously,' considering what I know of you. You probably do not expect much, as it is."

Esther Southerst sighed again very deeply, and then,

in a voice which she made sorrowful and melancholy, she replied :

" Poor Godfrey's death has cut me up so that I haven't had time to think of anything else."

" All the better," returned Dallas shortly, disgusted with what he knew to be her hypocrisy. " Then you won't have had time to form any great expectations ? "

" True, quite true," she answered ; " for I have always been comforted by the thought that that good old man would do me justice, and that in the last extremity I could go to him for consolation and help. '

" Very nice, Miss Southerst," said Dallas. " Very nice, indeed, and very well acted ; but it doesn't impose on me, and what is more important, it won't have a chance of imposing on the captain. You mean me to understand, of course, that if I don't do all that you would like, you will go and act the weeping Magdalene at his feet, and play on his feelings. But it won't do. During the last two months since poor Godfrey died, I have had more than one inquisitive individual asking questions about the manner of life you've been living in the last year or two. No matter what I've found out, I know enough to open Captain Drury's eyes very effectually—enough to warrant us in turning you adrift altogether. I'm not going to have any false delicacy with you, nor any beating about the bush. You had the whip-hand of the poor young fellow who's dead and gone, and you used the lash unmercifully. I shan't be as hard with you ; but I'm not going to play at pretending to believe in your sorrow. So long as you behave yourself properly, and so long as you keep at least a hundred miles between yourself and Seacove,

you shall have a hundred and fifty pounds a year. Break the conditions, or communicate with Captain Drury, or even attempt to let any one at Seacove know of your existence, and the allowance shall cease. If you refuse these terms, I shall tell Captain Drury all I know about you, and you won't get a brass farthing. You can take your choice."

The woman listened very attentively to this, and at the close laid aside all her pretense of sorrow. When he spoke of having learnt the details of her life, she started, and shot some very quick, sharp glances at him.

"No, I don't accept your offer of hush-money. It's not enough. If you know anything of my life, you know I'm dependent only upon my own work for my living, and I will go and live close to the Manor House gates and tell the people who I am ; and leave them to judge whether Godfrey's widow ought to be left to starve or to earn her living by her needle."

"Very good," said Dallas firmly. "Then there's no need for this interview to continue. What I have offered you is infinitely more than you deserve. If you prefer nothing, you shall have it—and have it with the addition of a good deal of unpleasantness of which you don't seem to think."

"I'll take two hundred," said the woman suddenly.

"After to-day, you will only have an offer of a hundred," answered Dallas ; and at this reply she left the room suddenly as if in anger.

"She'll take it," said Dallas, smiling to himself as he turned to his table again. "She's good at bounce, but she'll take it ; it's more than she deserves, and she knows it."

The thought had scarcely formed itself into words before his door was opened again hurriedly, and Esther Southerst came back.

"I'll take your offer, Mr. Dallas. "You've beaten me again," she said. "What are your conditions?"

"You can take a month to choose where you will live, and then write to me and tell me; and I will see that arrangements are made for the money to be paid to you regularly. If you like to leave the country and settle in the colonies, you shall have two hundred a year. The latter is what I should advise."

And it was the latter course that Esther Southerst adopted. Hugh Dallas thus being able to write to the captain a few weeks later, and announce that she had sailed for Australia.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"WHAT does he say? Any luck?"

"No; not a bit. It's just the usual yarn. Waiting for letters; and the weather not good; and wants us to see the place at its best. That's a likely yarn, eh?"

"Ha, I should think so," replied Guy Allingham, with a snort of skepticism, as Donald Ramsay made this reply. "I call it beastly rot. He brought us out to see the Continent, not to hang about round those girls' petticoats."

The lads were in a condition of half rebellion against Alan, who had brought them out for a scamper across the Continent. After about two weeks' touring, Alan had made straight for Nice, where Captain Drury and the two girls were staying, and had made excuse after excuse for not leaving.

"I don't care for this place either, do you?"

"Oh, the place is all right, so far as any place can be on the Continent; but we don't want to keep stuck up in one town. The girls are all right at Seacove, but we don't want 'em here. They're a nuisance," said Guy, with the superiority of a brother.

"Alan don't think so," said Don, with a guffaw.

"Alan doesn't think what?" said Alan Ramsay, himself coming unexpectedly up to where they were sitting.

"Why, you don't think Nice is dull," said Don, looking up and laughing meaningly.

"Well, you don't either, do you?" replied Alan, smiling in reply. "What I want you two to do is to get to work and have a steady week or fortnight grinding hard at French. You'll do a lot more keeping in one place than moving about."

"H'm," coughed Guy, in his high falsetto. "That's awfully good of you, Alan. Especially when I heard you or somebody say the other day that Nice French was as bad as any in Europe. If it's our French that keeps you a fixture, let's go back and stop in Paris, and get a Parisian accent."

Both the boys laughed.

"Hallo! That's rather a chalk up against you, Alan," cried Don. "You'll have to find another reason."

"One would think you found the Continent dull, like a couple of *blasé* old fops on the pounce for excitement to give a fillip to your jaded appetites," said Alan.

"Oh, the Continent's right enough," answered Guy, in a patronizing tone, "except for the churches—and the English girls," he added. "One would think there was nothing else to be seen, considering the time we've given to hanging about both."

Alan laughed at this good-naturedly.

"You'd better not let the captain hear you talk against the English girls, Guy. But, now, to-day I came in to propose an excursion for you two. I can't go with you, I have some letters to write, and some business to see about."

Guy coughed again at this, but Alan took no notice.

"You can climb up to the old Roman road, and make out the way to Monaco. I'll meet you at the Grand there, and we'll have dinner, and then come back by train together. What say you?"

"That'll suit my book," cried Guy. "But I wish you'd come, Alan," and Don joined in the request, for they both liked him, and liked to have him with them. He persisted in refusing, however, repeating the excuse he had made before.

"Drat the girls," said Guy; "I know that's what it is. I'll just give them a jolly good wigging when I can get them alone. This place is a blessed Capua for making softies of men." And with this parting shot he disappeared.

After the two lads had gone, Alan sat on for some few minutes writing a short, very short letter, and then began to grow fidgety. He got up and went to the window, and looked out into the gardens of the hotel, and whistled a tune to himself very softly.

"Glad I got rid of them for the whole day," he whispered under his breath. "Now, if I can only get a chance, I'll bring things to a climax. Here they are," he exclaimed suddenly, as he saw Captain Drury and the two girls leave the door of the hotel together, and then he hastened after them.

Margery's face brightened when Alan joined them, and they all walked together through the hotel gardens and out to the sea front, many people looking with interest at the girls, whose black mourning dresses formed a somber setting to their bright faces and flashing eyes.

After a time they met an old navy captain, between whom and Captain Drury a chatting acquaintance had been made, and the two old sailors walked together talking over matters of common interest.

In this way the other three were left together, and then Nan, with one of her subtle instincts, guessing what Alan wished, slipped away and rejoined the captain.

Alan himself could not have planned matters to suit him better; but then, as soon as he was alone with Margery, he began to feel awkward and tongue-tied.

"Where are the boys?" asked Margery.

"Gone to Monaco by the upper road. I'm going to meet them there to-night. I thought perhaps we might all go over and dine there. They're getting restless, I fancy, at stopping so long here."

"Guy's a regular scamperer, and Don's not much better. Are not you tired of Nice?" she asked innocently.

"Do you think I should be?"

"I should be, if it were not for uncle," she answered, meaning not what her words implied.

"Oh!" And then very significantly, "Thank you. *I* am not likely to tire of Nice while you are here, Margery."

"Is it far to Monaco along the upper road?" she asked, irrelevantly and self-consciously, after an awkward pause.

"Not far for the boys," he replied, and then they were silent.

"Won't you be glad to get back to Seacove again?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"Yes, I should like to go away at once, if it weren't that I am afraid for uncle's sake, on account of poor Godfrey. I fear he grieves in secret."

"Strikes me I'd better do what the boys wish, and not go on with our tour. I'm not much account here."

He was conscious, even while he said it, of how small it would sound.

"I think you ought," agreed Margery. "You brought them out for a certain purpose, and certainly ought not to disappoint them. How far are you going to take them?"

"It will be a long time before we meet again," replied Alan, annoyed with himself for not being able to direct the talk as he wished, and half chagrined that Margery seemed to take so little interest in his movements.

"What is the matter, Alan?" asked the girl, noticing then the change in his manner. "Has anything happened? Have the boys vexed you? Guy's very trying sometimes, and you're not so used to his ways as I am."

She looked with a partly troubled, partly inquiring expression into his face.

"I am a fool, that's all," answered Alan, "and I'm only just beginning to find it out." And he laughed.

"Have I vexed you, Alan?" she asked. "I can hear something in that laugh that I don't think ought to be there."

"Shall I tell you? I think I was fool enough to feel vexed because I wanted you to show some interest in my being here, and you did not seem to care

whether I went or stopped. In fact, you told me to go. I said I was a fool."

She did not put her answer into words, but looked at him reproachfully. He read the look aright, and he went close to her side and took her hand. They had wandered back into the hotel garden, and were in a little secluded nook.

"Margery, forgive me. I am a brute. But I have suffered so much in all this, and a great fear has held me lest that which came between us was after all likely to separate us even now, that—that the cause is gone. You remember that walk we had that day in the summer, when—when you hurt your foot. You remember I told you I was sure you had good reason for all you did, and that I should have faith in you just the same. Is it nothing to you now whether I go or stay now?"

She glanced up to his face again, and said nothing, but did not withdraw her hand.

"You must give me an answer, sweetheart, this time. You remember that afternoon in the rosery—the day old Dallas first went over to the Manor House—when Guy came and interrupted us. If I'd pressed for an answer then all this trouble would have been spared us, for you'd have been pledged to me, wouldn't you, my darling?"

He bent low down to her, and caught the faintly whispered "Yes" as it fell from her trembling lips.

"We must set the seal to that, Margery," he whispered, drawing her close to him, and pressing his lips to hers.

"There's some one coming," she whispered hur-

riedly, after a moment, as the sound of footsteps approaching was heard.

"I don't care if all the world comes; they could only see what all the world may see, that I love you and you love me."

They turned away arm in arm, however, both intensely happy; and then suddenly Margery laughed merrily, and blushed very prettily.

"What is it, Madge?" aked her lover.

"Why did you send Guy and Don away on such an expedition to-day?" she asked, her eyes dancing merrily.

"I see what you mean," he answered, laughing in his turn. "I didn't mean to have a second edition of the rosery interruption. I meant to make sure of you, and bind you to me for ever and ever, sweetheart. Now, if any one, even the captain, wants you to sacrifice yourself again, you'll have to get my leave first, Madge, and that's the only thing I'll never give you."

She pressed his arm, and nestled closer to him than before, very lovingly and tenderly, for she knew by this that he had understood the reason of her engagement to Godfrey.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"Do you think uncle looks much better, Mr. Dallas?"

"Not only looks better, Miss Nan, but I am sure he is much better—better in body, better in mind, and better in spirits. He is like a man who has been carrying a load all his life, and finds it drop from his shoulders."

"How?" and Nan turned questioningly to her companion.

"You mean why the loss of one he loved so much should promise to prove a joy rather than a sorrow. There was always a flaw in his love, a fear in his life you never knew the cause of, and he is too brave a soul ever to have let it appear. But poor Godfrey's future was always a problem of which he could never think without pain and apprehension. His death was the one right solution, and the captain will see this as soon as the pain has passed; indeed, he is beginning to see it now. And you both have helped him to fight down the pain."

"It pained him infinitely to come home though," returned Nan. "And when Madge and I went with him to the grave, I thought he would have broken down. I have never seen him so moved. Poor uncle! Yet I could see then that he was trying to force himself to think that it was for the best. There never was such a Christian as uncle; never a man so staunch, loyal, heart-whole in his implicit faith in God's goodness.

But you have shed a new light on his conduct that day. I believe he was partly reproaching himself as if it were a sin in him to think it best that the problem, as you call it, of Godfrey's life had been solved by early death. But he has no thought or suspicion that Godfrey himself helped to solve it."

Dallas looked at the girl in some surprise. It was the first time they had met to be alone since the day of Godfrey's death.

"And you?" he asked.

"I have no doubt of it. I did not know all that was going on at that dreadful time; but you told me a great deal, and I saw there was some strong secret force which drove him nearly mad, and, I think, that day quite mad."

"Did you ever say anything of this . . . ?" he began.

"Do you think I should give away the confidence you—I mean, any one—placed in me? No, of course I said nothing. But you know well enough that I am right."

He made no answer immediately, but looked out over the sea. They were sitting together on a ledge of rock on the face of the cliff.

After a pause he smiled and turned his face to her with a pleased light in his eyes.

"You were a staunch ally, Miss Nan, and quick, too, at drawing conclusions. But not always the right ones."

"Not the right ones? I was right in that," she said, perplexed by his words, and showing her perplexity in her look.

"I mean about Mrs. Rudyer."

She blushed.

"What of her? I think I was right about her."

"Why did you think she wanted to break up the alliance?" he asked, smiling again.

"Where is she?" asked Nan, glancing up rapidly, and then dropping her eyes as quickly.

"She is in London, I think."

"Have you seen her lately? Margery has not heard from her for a long while, and she doesn't write to me," and Nan laughed.

"Odd, that. I heard that she was going to be married again—not from herself, so it may be correct—but I have only seen her once since you went away. I was in London on business, and chance threw us together. I only saw very little of her, just a few minutes' conversation; but it seems to have been effectual, for when I got back to Middlingham, I had a letter from her, short, pithy, and pointed, saying simply that, after what had passed between us, there was only one thing she devoutly prayed for, and that was that she might never see me again as long as she lived."

Nan laughed again. It pleased her to hear this.

"You must be a very terrible person when you are in that kind of mood; for what you said here seemed to have no effect upon her."

"I'm better as an ally than an opponent, you think, Miss Nan?" he said, his voice a grade lower in tone.

"I have had no experience of you as a foe. But if you are as strong an opponent as you are a firm ally, I would rather have you on my side."

"Could you bear with me always not only on your side but at your side; as a life-long ally?" he asked.

Nan looked up laughingly.

"Is it very dangerous to refuse alliances?" she asked.

"Very," said Dallas, smiling as he took her hand.

"Then I'd better surrender," and she let him draw her close to him.

"My darling," he whispered, as he kissed her. "My ally in earnest now," he said.

"But not to be crushed out of all shape and knowledge, sir," she said, as, covered with blushes, she drew back from his embrace, and laughed merrily.

. . . . . .

The captain was delighted when he heard the news; and looked pleased and light-hearted.

He laughed and kissed Nan, and shook Dallas by the hand, and pinched the girl's blushing cheeks and called her a sly little fox for having cheated him.

"And have I been such a blind noodle all this time as not to see what was going on? Well, well. It's time somebody else took the helm with these young cutters, or I shall be steering them into mischief."

He had the two girls one on each arm then, and he kissed them each in turn; and they clung to him lovingly, both smiling and blushing.

"Please God, you'll all be happy—as happy as I would wish you to be; as happy as you have made me." He looked from one to the other of the two girls as he spoke. "Here, Alan, here, Hugh," and as he spoke he held out a hand of each of the blushing girls. "Take them. I only make one condition.

Let me see as much of them as you can ; just at first, to ease the parting."

"Oh, uncle, as if we were going to leave you alone! You're not going to get rid of me so easily, I can tell you!" cried Nan, laughing.

Margery said nothing, but moved back to his side and slipped her arm through his, and nestled close to him.

"It's the law of Nature and the command of God, my dears," he said simply, understanding Margery's action as readily as Nan's words. "And who am I to set myself and my thoughts and stubbornness against His ways and His will? The edge of the sword of sorrow has been turned by the violence of the blow struck at me, and my old years look calmly at what would stir your young blood. You must not stay events for my sake. God bless you both—you, Margery, and you, too, Nan. You have been unspeakable blessings to me ; and you have both chosen as I would have had you choose—*now.*"

The last word was little more than a whisper ; but then it seemed to strike him that it might jar, or seem unkind, and he turned to Alan, and took his hand and shook it warmly.

"God bless you, Alan! You will make Margery a loyal husband, and me a good—son."

They all, knowing what lay behind the words and the act, loved him for the kindly thought. Then he laughed again as he took the girls' arms.

"What a lucky old sea-dog I am," he cried, "to have two such daughters, and then to find two such sons to match them and make them happy!"

And all the afternoon and evening he was in the same kindly, happy mood, laughing and chatting with one and another; getting the girls to sing to him, and cracking all the well-seasoned, old-fashioned jokes he could think of.

But when the two lovers had left and the girls had gone to bed he stepped out into the keen spring night air to smoke. And when he was quite alone, he thought over all that was going to happen and in a vague way began to wonder how the old House would seem when he was alone in it.

After a time he went indoors again and sat by the fire in the sanctum, thinking over and over again of the changes that had come to him. Godfrey gone—never to come back. Margery and Nan—Sweetness and Light as they had been in the hour of his trouble—going, to form other associations and live other lives than that of the past.

He could not keep back the sigh which broke from his lips as he thought how empty life would be until he had grown used to the change.

Then a little, slim hand was slipped into his—a white, soft arm encircled his neck, and Margery, kneeling by the side of the low chair on which he sat, was looking up with her sweet, gentle, loving eyes full of a tender-hearted reproach.

"You are grieving, uncle. I saw it to-day. You think I am going to leave you; and I have come down now, because I thought I could catch you in the act, and try you and condemn you and punish you all at the same time." Her lips parted in a loving smile. "You are a very wicked, heartless, cruel uncle,"—she

kissed him at every adjective—"you want to turn me out of your house and I won't go. There, sir uncle, do you hear, I won't go. And you for your punishment are condemned to say that you'll never, never, never dare to think of being parted from me again."

He looked down at her, and seeing in her eyes a troubled look, kissed her.

"It shall be as you wish, Madge, for you are a lordly little lawmaker. But—"

"I will not have 'buts,'" she cried, shaking her finger at him. "My marriage will make no difference. Alan and I have settled it all, and you have only to agree. Say you agree, uncle."

"I agree, Madge; but to what?"

"To let everything be as Alan and I wish; and never to part from us, until you yourself wish it."

"You are a good lassie to me, Madge—a rare good lassie—and just as able now as when you were a little one to do with me as you will. For I love you, my lass, aye, as much as you love me."

Then the girl threw both her arms round him, and drew herself on to his knee, kissed him fervently and lovingly, and caressed and petted him, until the last shadow of grief had left his face.

THE END.

THE

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